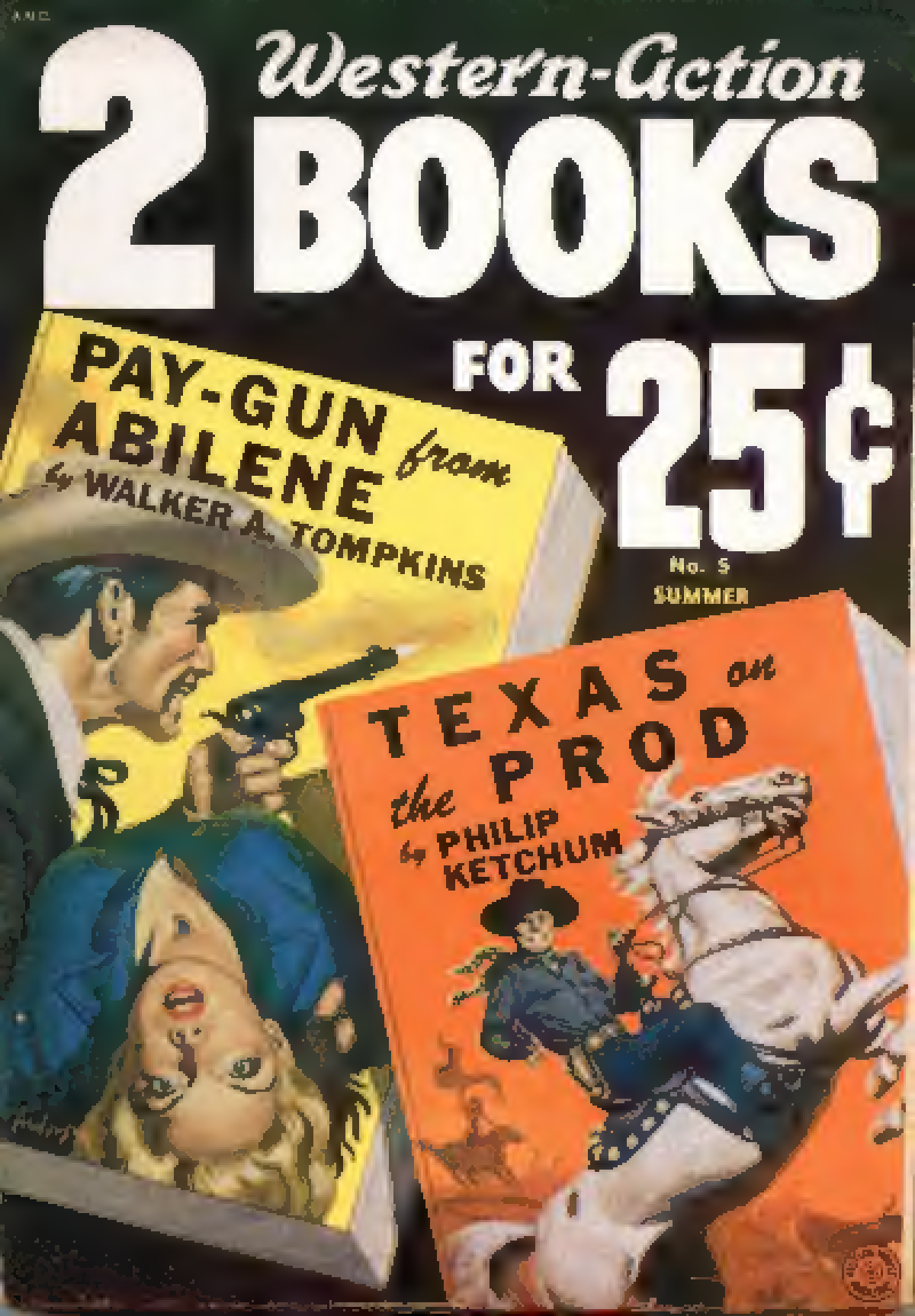
2 Western-Action BOOKS FOR 25¢



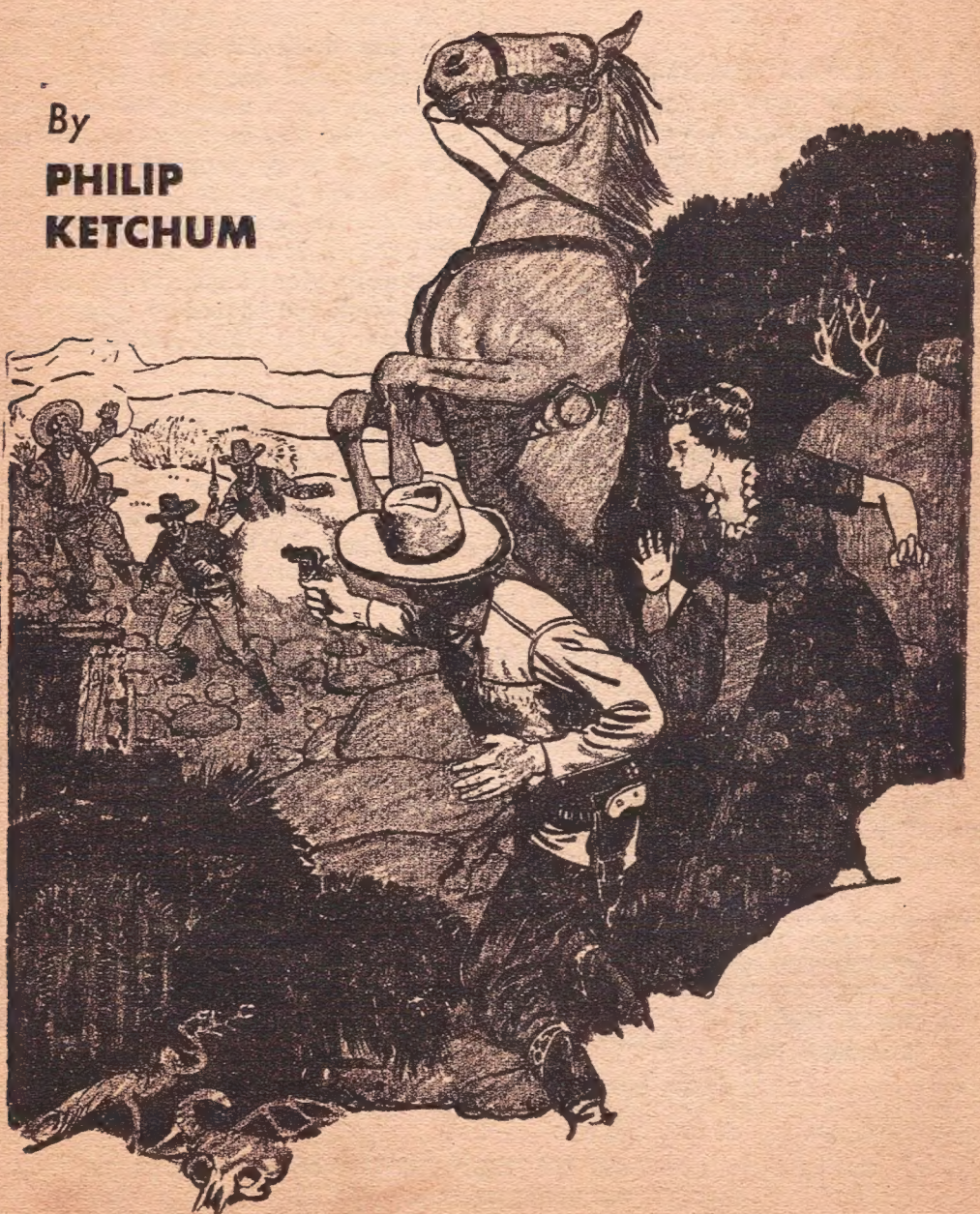
No. 5
SUMMER

Book No. 1

TEXAS ON THE PROD

By

PHILIP KETCHUM



TEXAS on the PROD

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Horse-rancher Ben Rogan was finished. Broke! He should have said *adios* to Los Prados. But something in Rogan's mesquite-makeup sparked to the jangle of 45's. Some *malo* streak made him hire his Colts to the man-hating, seductive boss of Mescalero Range.

I

THIS WAS THE END. THE END of four years of struggle, of back breaking labor and constant self-denial. The end of a dream of independence. At least for a while. At least until he could find the means to make another start. There was no other way to look at it. There was no way to escape the hard facts of what had happened two weeks ago and of what faced him now. He stared bleakly at the empty corrals in the meadows. The brood mares, the stallions, and the horses which should have been there, were gone. Rustlers had hit the ranch while he had been on a trip to Fort Stanton to arrange for a sale of remounts to the army. They had cleaned him out, completely.

"You can talk to her," said Paddy Knowles. "She's not as hard to talk to as Steve was."

Ben Rogan shrugged his shoulders. "Of course I'll talk to her, but what good will it do?"

"She might make you another loan."

"Why would she?"

"She might. Steve wouldn't, if he was still alive, but you can never tell what a woman will do."

A smile cracked briefly across Ben's face. He shook his head. Paddy's sage judgment could not be applied to Clara Bane. She was a woman, but in business matters, she was as shrewd as any man. She could be generous or hard, and in this instance there was no point in being generous. He owed her bank fifteen hundred dollars. It would take five thousand more and a year of work to put him back in business, and he had no guarantees to offer that at the end of that time, rustlers wouldn't hit him again.

"This land is as good as it ever was," said Paddy Knowles. "You've made improvements on it."

"Enough," said Ben dryly, "to cover what I owe the bank. Come on. Let's pack up and head for town."

He turned abruptly toward the cabin. He was a tall man. Tall and slender and thirty years old. And tired. Tired from the shock of what had happened and what it meant to him. Tired from almost a week in the saddle, scouring the Mescalero hills in search of some trail of the rustlers. Tired in anticipation of what faced him when he reached Los Prados. Tired as he thought of the days ahead.

In the cabin, he spread a blanket on the

T. T. SCOTT, *President*
MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

JACK BYRNE, *Managing Editor*
JEROME BIXBY, *Editor*

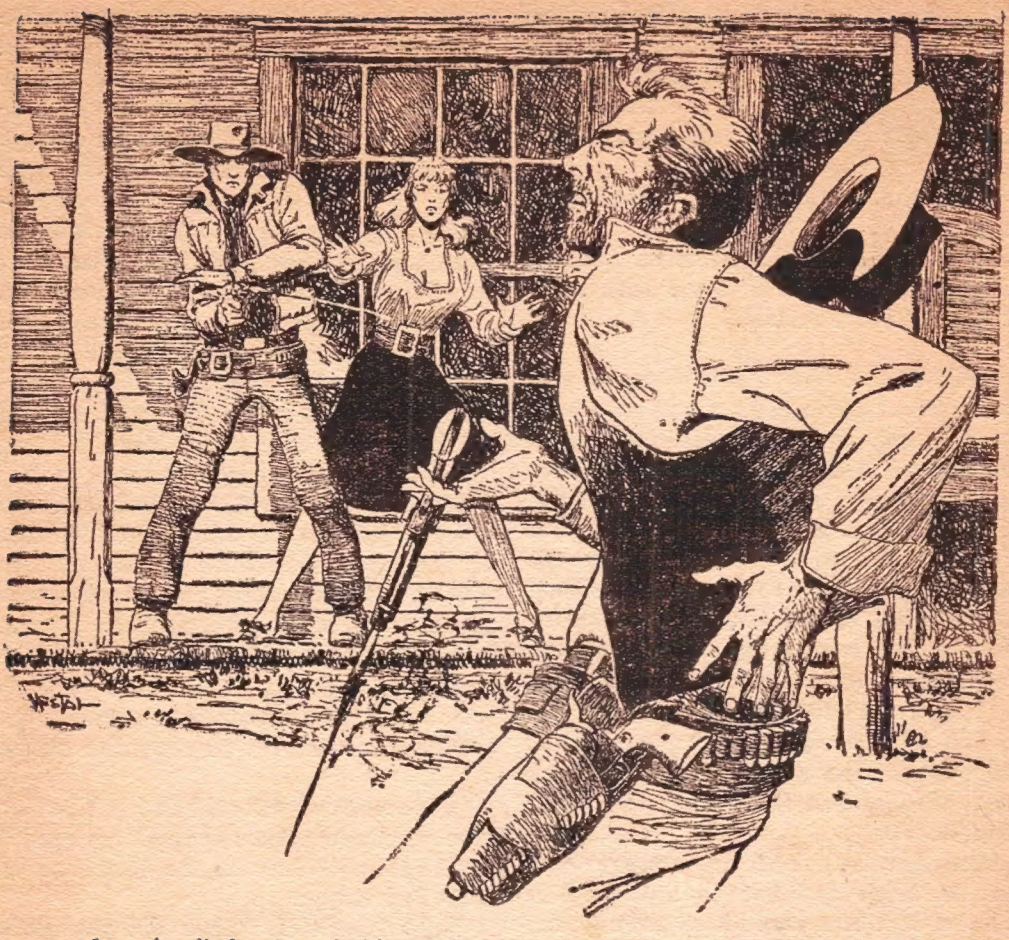
No. 5, VOL. 1
SUMMER 1951

A FICTION HOUSE PUBLICATION

25c

TWO WESTERN ACTION-BOOKS: Published quarterly by Fight Stories, Inc., 130 W. 42nd St., New York 18, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted 1951 by Fight Stories, Inc. All rights reserved. Subscription rate for U. S. A. is $1.25.

THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO WESTERN ACTION-BOOKS WILL BE ON SALE AT THE NEWSSTANDS ON MAY 15, 1951



floor, and on it piled extra clothing taken from a box under his bunk. To this he added a bundle of personal papers, four books of records covering his years here on the ranch, a single action Colt .45 which had belonged to his father, and a colorful *corbata* which had hung on the wall above his bunk, the memento of a trip below the border.

"We're not coming back, huh?" said Paddy Knowles, who had been watching him from the doorway.

"I'm not," said Ben, briefly.

"What about the grub we've got on hand?"

"Take any you want. Leave the rest here."

Paddy scowled. He was an older man than Ben Rogan. Older, more solidly built, wide shouldered, heavy. A bandage still circled his head, covering a deep scalp wound received in a brief fight with the rustlers. He considered himself lucky. Slim Johnston, the other man who had worked for Ben Rogan, had been killed in the fight.

"Hurry it up," Ben ordered.

Paddy Knowles crossed to his bunk. He pulled a canvas bag from beneath it and started shoving into it his personal belongings. "Maybe I can get a job with Arne Macgregor," he mentioned. "They tell me Arne is taking on riders."

"Maybe," Ben agreed.

"What will you do, Ben?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you could ride for Arne Macgregor?"

Ben shook his head. He found a piece of rope and tied his bundle, then straightened and glanced around the cabin. It was a good cabin, solidly built. It would stand here a long time as a memorial to his four years on this high bench country above Grand Mesa. It would serve as a home to some other man who might be more lucky than he had been. Or perhaps it would someday be an outpost cabin for Arne

Macgregor, who, according to rumor, had made an offer to Jinny Halstead for the Grand Mesa ranch. This brought a scowl to his face. He didn't like the thought of having built this cabin for Arne Macgregor.

"Are you ready to ride?" he asked gruffly.

Paddy nodded and shouldered his bag. "Sure, but I'd like to come back here. Maybe someday, we will."

THE ROAD they followed wasn't well marked and could scarcely have been called a road. It dropped down through a long twisting fold in the pine covered hills to the heavier pine forests on the north edge of Grand Mesa. It skirted this thick stand of yellow pine, coming out, finally, on the north hogback above the broad and rolling prairie which dipped gradually toward the Rio Penasco, marked by a distant row of giant cottonwoods. After a few miles along the hogback it dropped down into the valley and angled across country toward its junction with the Grand Mesa road. From there, the way into Los Prados was arrow straight.

The sun had been high when they started. High and hot in a clear blue summer sky. There had been scarcely any wind and there was none now as they crossed the valley. Ben Rogan could feel the sun boiling against his shoulders and sucking up moisture from his body. He was glad they weren't facing it, squinting into its glare, and he was glad of the promise of night. The nights were always cool and bathed by a freshening wind. The nights made these summer days bearable.

Night and Los Prados. A wry smile crossed Ben's face. He pictured the town toward which they were riding, a town of square, colorless, sun baked adobe dwellings and of ugly, unpainted, frame and log stores. A mixture of the old and the new. A Mexican village by origin, serving those who farmed lands along the Penasco. A cow-town by development serving the ranches over an area of better than a hundred miles. A quiet town, usually. An orderly town. A friendly town with an easy flow of life through its dusty streets and lanes. There would be music tonight in its cantinas and the sound of low laughter from the couples on the benches in the plaza. On the porch of the Great Northern hotel men would talk of the cattle market, the late summer roundup and the new land laws being debated in Congress. At the Truitt House there would be gambling. And at Waverley's—

Ben Rogan scowled, wondering if Clara Bane had anything to do with what went on at Waverley's. It was rumored she did. It was said that she owned Waverley's. Such a story, of course, could have had its origin in her background. Stephen Bane, who had died two years before, had found Clara in some dive in El Paso. He had married her and brought her back to Los Prados and had set her up as his wife in a blunt defiance of some of the women of the town. And some of the men, as well. If Clara was hard, now, it might well be the result of the difficult times she had had as Stephen's wife. If she owned Waverley's, it might be to hit back at those who hadn't thought she was good enough to speak to, or even to recognize on the street.

"Five miles more," said Paddy Knowles. "Do you know what I'm thinking about?"

"A glass of beer at the Dutchman's," said Ben Rogan.

Paddy chuckled. "How did you guess it?"

"Maybe I'm thinking of the same thing," said Ben.

He lifted his horse to a trot and stared up the road. Far in the west, the sun was dropping down behind the Sacramento mountains.

THEY reached Los Prados just before dusk and turned up Front street, toward the Plaza. A stray, mongrel dog welcomed them, yipping at the heels of their horses, and almost immediately was joined by two more dogs. From the front of one of the adobe houses a naked Mexican boy, about six, straightened up from his play and waved to them. Three laborers, trudging in from their work in the bean fields across the Penasco, gave them a casual and disinterested look. At Borghoff's Corral, which fronted on the near side of the Plaza, Ben reined up. He turned in the saddle and glanced at Paddy Knowles.

"I'm going to leave my horse here," he

said slowly. "When I'll be riding again, I don't know. Maybe tonight. Maybe not for a week."

"I think I'll tie up in the lot next to the bank," said Paddy Knowles.

"I owe you forty-five dollars."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'll get it and pay you," said Ben. "Where will you be? At the Dutchman's?"

"Probably. For a while. You're not going back to the ranch?"

Ben shook his head.

"About this job with Arne, then? It'll be all right if I take it?"

"If you can stand working for him."

"He's not a bad boss."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. He said, "Luck, Paddy."

"Sure," grinned Paddy Knowles. "I'll get the job if I can, but when you're back in business for yourself, just holler, and I'll come, running."

He spoke to his horse after this and rode on down the Plaza square and up the far side toward the bank lot. Ben watched him, smiling. Paddy Knowles was a good man, honest, conscientious, unspectacular in his work but steady and dependable. In Paddy Knowles and Slim Johnston, who was dead, he had had men he could count on. But still he had failed. The rustlers, apparently, had struck in force. They had struck at a time when he was away. They had had a two day start on the sheriff's posse, due to the death of Slim Johnston and the serious wounding of Paddy Knowles. Their trail had been wiped out in a driving rain storm. He could find a dozen reasons not to blame himself for what had happened, yet the feeling that he was to blame was still there. The horse ranch had been his venture, his responsibility. It's failure was his.

EZRA BORGHOFF came out to take charge of his horse and the bundle tied behind the saddle. Borghoff was a man well past middle age. He was bearded, stooped, and walked with a distinct limp. He was a garrulous old man, always ready with a probing question and willing to pay for his answer with some choice bit of gossip. He was impervious to any rebuff. He was dirty and often drunk, and wholly untrustworthy.

"Any sign of the rustlers?" he demanded as he reached for the reins of Ben's horse.

Ben Rogan swung to the ground. He ruffed his hands up and down the sleeves of his coat, brushing away the surface dust of the long ride to town. He shook his head. "No sign of them at all."

"Hal Wallace rode in today," said the stableman. "He said he had scoured the Mescaleros, but if you ask me, he didn't look too hard. He doesn't like riding any more. He's like me. He's getting soft."

Hal Wallace was the sheriff. He had been sheriff here in this county for a long time. He was a big, heavy, easy going man with no fondness for trouble.

"Look after my horse," said Ben Rogan. "And take care of that bundle tied behind the saddle. How soon I'll be riding, I don't know."

"What you going to do, Ben?" asked Borghoff.

"I don't know."

"Maybe you could get a job with Jinny Halstead."

"With Jinny Halstead?" Ben echoed. "What does Jinny need with riders?"

"You never can tell," Borghoff chuckled mysteriously. "Maybe she won't need any at all. Maybe she'll just sell out to Arne Macgregor."

Ben Rogan frowned. He wondered what Borghoff was trying to tell him. A month before, Sam Halstead had died and had left the Grand Mesa ranch to his motherless daughter. Jinny was twenty, or maybe a little older. She had people somewhere in Texas and it had been generally assumed that Jinny would sell the ranch and join them. Arne Macgregor, according to all reports, had made her a fair offer. Arne had coveted the mesa for a long time. The mesa and its rich stand of timber.

"You mean Jinny's not going to sell?" Ben asked slowly.

"She hasn't yet," said Borghoff. "And maybe she won't, until she has to. Maybe she won't even then."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. He turned away and crossed to the Plaza and stood there, near the old watering trough, rolling a cigaret and glancing casually around the square. He marked Waverley's, at the corner down from the bank. Waverley's

was an ornate, two story frame structure, one of the new buildings in the town. A wide stairway led up to its porch and its front door, a stairway used by no one but Belle Waverley and her four girls. But there was a side and a back entrance, and if the stories one heard were true most of the men in the valley knew the interior of the Waverley home.

Wondering again if Clara Bane was responsible for Waverley's, Ben chuckled. If she was, he declared, it served the town right. The town and the valley. It was rubbing it in where it hurt. Los Prados hadn't accepted Clara Bane. It had labeled her a fancy woman. The people here who counted had done all in their power to run her out of town, and had lived to see her take over Steve Bane's bank and other interests, when Steve had died. In two years since then, the general attitude toward her hadn't changed. But there had been a few changes. Men who had to deal with her had come to respect her business ability, her keen foresight, and the shrewd way she had of cutting through a discussion to the heart of a problem. Yes, there were men in Los Prados who did more than respect Clara Bane's ability. There were men here who feared her.

ARNE MACGREGOR left the Truitt house, stepped down on the boardwalk and started toward the Great Northern hotel. Two of his men were with him, Breck Hollister and Matt Billings. Hollister and Billings were both tall, heavy men, but Arne Macgregor towered above them. He stood well over six feet and weighed close to two hundred and forty pounds. He was nearing fifty, but didn't show it. His hair was still thick and black. He still stood erect. He could spend a day in the saddle and have more energy left at nightfall than many a younger man who rode for him. He had come here a dozen years before with his wife and son and two hired men. He had come driving five hundred head of cattle and with less than fifty dollars in his pocket, according to his boast. He had settled on the flat lands south of the Grand Mesa and in the years since, had built up the largest ranch in this part of the country. He had become, in any matter of local politics, a man to be considered.

Half way to the Great Northern hotel, Arne Macgregor glanced toward the Plaza and noticed Ben Rogan near the watering trough. He stopped, said something to the men with him, then turned, stepped down into the dust of the street, and angled toward Ben. Hollister and Billings followed him.

Ben sucked on the cigaret he had rolled and lit. He scowled, and aware of it, tried to wipe the scowl from his face. But some of the tension which had come with the scowl, remained. It had always been this way with Ben, so far as Arne Macgregor was concerned. His dislike of the man went back a long ways, back as far as his first year in the valley, his first fall roundup. He had been working, then, for a man named Craig, and Arne Macgregor had challenged his talley of the MAC stock. There had been a bitter exchange of words, a sudden scuffle, and Ben had found himself on his back, half dazed by Arne Macgregor's fist. He had clawed for his gun but before he could draw it, had looked into the barrel of the gun which had jumped into the older man's hands.

Others in the group then had come between them and the quarrel had been patched up but the bitter memory of it and of the things Macgregor had said still rankled in Ben's memory. And since then they had clashed on other occasions, never seriously, but enough to keep their mutual antagonism alive. An antogonism which had always seemed to amuse Macgregor.

Near the watering trough, Arne Macgregor stopped. There was a wide grin on his ruddy face, a mocking twinkle in his eyes. He said, "Howdy, Ben. Looking for a job?"

"Not with you," said Ben, bluntly.

The big man's grin seemed to broaden. "Maybe there's a good reason for that. We're a little careful whom we hire."

BEN LIFTED HIS HAND and pushed back his hat. He pulled in a long, slow breath, fighting against a sudden, hot surge of anger which was choking him. He was confused by Macgregor's almost deliberate insult. He couldn't measure the reason for it. Macgregor wasn't a man

to go out of his way to cause trouble, wasn't a man to pick a fight without reason.

"Maybe you'd like a suggestion," Macgregor was saying, and his smile was gone now, had completely disappeared.

"Or maybe I wouldn't," said Ben Rogan.

"Here it is, anyhow. They're hiring men up in Lincoln county. They're paying good wages. You can get a job there. You'll find none here, Rogan. None you can hold."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Ben.

"Dead sure."

Ben moistened his lips. He said, "Thanks, Macgregor. Thanks for the advice."

"You'd better take it."

"Maybe I will," said Ben. "Or again, maybe I won't."

He was feeling suddenly more sure of himself, suddenly sure that nothing was going to happen right now. This was just the opening move in some game he didn't understand. It was a move which fitted Macgregor's temperament. Macgregor was an important man. He was used to giving orders, used to making threats. He was blunt and awkward in the way he approached things. Blunt and awkward and bullish.

Behind him, Hollister and Billings were both grinning. They were younger men than Macgregor. They were easier to get along with. Ben had never had trouble with them and he had a feeling, now, that they were as much amused at Macgregor as at him.

"You don't belong here, Rogan," Macgregor was saying. "You don't fit in. Take my advice and ride."

Ben Rogan shrugged and made no other answer. He watched Arne Macgregor turn and lumber away, followed by Hollister and Billings. The three men headed for the Great Northern hotel where they would probably have their evening meal. As they reached the porch, Macgregor looked back. It was growing dark and Ben couldn't see the expression on Macgregor's face but he could imagine the scowl which would be there.

He could imagine the scowl and understand it, for Macgregor had never liked him and never liked any man who bucked him. He could imagine the scowl and understand it, but he couldn't understand what had just happened or the reason for Macgregor's advice. Ben dropped his cigaret and stepped on it. A dog, wandering across the Plaza, stopped and sniffed at his heels, looked up at him, and then moved on. Three riders came pounding into town and pulled up in a cloud of dust in front of the Dutchman's. A man who had had too much to drink reeled through the swinging doors of the Mesa saloon, tripped over something on the board walk, and pitched head first into the street. After a moment he rolled over, sat up, and then leaned back against the walk. Someone angling through the Plaza turned toward him, stopped, and then called, "Ben, is that you?"

Ben glanced over his shoulder. "Yep, Ollie. It's me."

OLLIE FARNSWORTH moved on forward. He was a slight, stoop shouldered man, pale and almost bald. He worked in the bank, had worked there for years. There were some people who had been surprised when Ollie Farnsworth stayed on after the death of Steve Bane, for Ollie's wife had been outspoken in her opinions of the brazen hussy whom Steve had married. Ollie's wife now explained things by saying that Ollie was still on the job out of his sense of responsibility to the community. She implied that Ollie did all in his power to offset Clara Bane's mistakes.

"A nice night," said Ollie.

Ben grunted.

"Sure," said Ollie. "It's a nice night. She wants to see you."

"Who wants to see me?" asked Ben.

"Clara."

Ben scowled. "I'll be in tomorrow."

"She wants to see you tonight."

Ben glanced toward the bank. The building was dark. He looked at Ollie Farnsworth.

"She went home about an hour ago," Ollie mentioned. "She asked me to stay in town for a while, just on the chance you might ride in. She said I was to bring you straight to her house."

Ben shook his head. "I haven't eaten yet."

"You can eat later."

"But I haven't shaved, Ollie. The dust and sweat of a week is on me."

Ollie smiled. "This won't be exactly a social call, Ben. She wants to see you tonight. Right away."

Ben Rogan was still scowling, shaking his head. He didn't like this, but seeing Clara Bane tonight held at least one advantage. It would immediately put behind him one of the unpleasant jobs which he faced. It would clear the way for whatever he decided to do tomorrow. And he had to see her. He might as well do it and get it over.

"I'll walk there with you," said Ollie. "It's on my way home."

"It could still wait until tomorrow," Ben muttered. But he offered no further objections and when Ollie started back across the Plaza, Ben walked with him.

II

WHEN STEPHEN BANE HAD come to Los Prados he had lived in an old adobe house on the outskirts of town, close to the river. Gradually he had added to it, his additions being of log and frame construction. What Stephen Bane had wanted of so large a place, no one knew and what use, now, Clara made of its many rooms was a deep mystery, for she lived there alone with only the service of a Mexican woman who came in to cook her evening meal. Beyond the house was a barn and corral, not now in use. Clara owned a horse and occasionally went riding, but she kept her horse at Borghoff's.

Ben Rogan and Ollie Farnsworth, walking down the street toward the river, came to the picket fence which stood in front of the Bane home, came to the gate, and stopped. Ollie pushed it open. "I'll go to the door with you," he mentioned.

"Afraid I'll lose my way?" asked Ben, dryly.

Ollie shrugged his shoulders. He moved up the walk. Ben followed him. They came to the door and Ollie knocked. "I won't be able to stay," Ollie was explaining. "I should have been home an hour ago."

Ben said nothing. He rubbed the stubble of beard and wished, vaguely, that he had insisted on taking the time to shave, and change his shirt. But it probably wasn't important. He had no favors to ask of the woman whom he was to see.

The door opened and against the background of light from the room beyond, he saw Clara Bane. She was tall, slender, and she stood very straight. Her hair had a copperish tinge and was tight braided and pinned close to her head. She was wearing a black gown which was cut daringly low and which bared her shoulders, a long, plain black gown which almost swept the floor.

"I found him, Clara," said Ollie Farnsworth. "And I have that letter from the judge."

He reached into his coat pocket, withdrew an envelope, and held it toward Clara Bane. The woman took it. She nodded and said, "Thanks, Ollie," and then added, "Won't you come in, Ben."

She had a low, pleasant voice and was smiling as she stepped back from the door. Ben moved forward, again acutely aware of his personal appearance, the stubble of his beard, his shaggy hair, his dusty boots and jeans, his sweat stained shirt and almost threadbare coat. He took off his hat. A mumbling apology struggled in his throat but he held it back, reminding himself that after all this wasn't a social visit. He and Clara Bane had a business matter to discuss and settle. It shouldn't take long.

"Here," said the woman. "I'll take your hat."

She reached for it and then turned away, moving deeper into the room, across the room. Behind him, Ben heard the door close. His eyes circled the room. It was a pleasant room. A deep napped, figured rug covered most of the floor. In front of the corner fireplace was a settee which was probably turned to face it in the winter. In another corner stood a desk and chair. Near the front window was a long table and in the corner beyond, two silk covered chairs. There were pictures on the walls and in three wall brackets, lamps were burning.

Clara Bane placed his hat on a low stand near the settee, then turned to face him. "You look tired, Ben. Sit down. Take this chair over here."

She sank back in a corner of the set-

tee, and Ben, moving forward, took the chair she had indicated. "I am tired," he admitted. "I've been doing a lot of riding."

"No sign of the rustlers?"

"None."

"What chance is there of recovering your horses?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe a chance in a thousand. The sheriff thinks they were driven into the Mescaleros and sold to some roving band of Apaches. If that's what happened, I'll never see them again."

"One of your men was killed in the raid, wasn't he."

"Yes. Slim Johnston."

"Did he have any folks? A wife somewhere?"

"No. At least I don't think so."

CLARA BANE was silent for a moment, frowning, looking at the floor. Ben stared at her thoughtfully. He had never seen her dressed as she was tonight, dressed as a woman might dress for a man. In the bank and around town she wore clothing which buttoned primly to the throat. And no powder or perfume. Tonight her cheeks were faintly colored and he had caught the faint scent of perfume when he had first stepped into the room.

Tonight, for the first time since he had known her, he was uneasily conscious of her as a woman.

"Ben," she said suddenly, looking up at him, "what are you going to do now?"

"Everyone asks me that," he grinned, "and the answer is always the same. I don't know."

"Will you give up your ranch?"

"I'll have to."

"Did you think it strange I wanted to see you tonight."

"A little strange," Ben admitted. He stretched out in the chair, crossing one leg over the other, and wondering what was coming now. This would be it, he decided. Clara Bane had a direct way of dealing with people, of hammering straight to the point.

"Ben," she said slowly, "a month ago when Sam Halstead died, he owed the bank three thousand dollars on a feed loan, similar to yours. What cash he left, Jinny needed. The court, with her agreement, ordered the loan paid through the sale of some of her cattle. Last week a cattle buyer was through. He ear-marked the cattle for which he agreed to pay the bank three thousand dollars, taking delivery in two months. Until then, the cattle are to be held on the ranch. This afternoon I spoke to Judge Sims. I have from him a court order, authorizing the appointment of a custodian for those cattle who will be responsible for seeing that nothing happens to them until the sale is completed. I need a man for that job."

"Me?" asked Ben Rogan.

"Why not."

"It doesn't sound like much of a job, Clara."

"Things might happen, Ben."

"Like what?"

"Like poisoned water-holes on the mesa. Like stampedes. Like rustling."

Ben straightened. A scowl jumped into his face. "Arne Macgregor?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes, Arne Macgregor. He has tried to buy the ranch from Jinny Halstead. She has refused to sell. I know what's going to happen, Ben. I know it as surely as I know my own name. Before another week has passed, Arne Macgregor will be crowding in on the mesa. He will pull every trick in the bag to make it so uncomfortable for Jinny that she will have to sell."

"And you want me to buck something like that."

"Yes, Ben."

"You'd need an army."

Clara Bane's eyes met his without flinching. "Maybe I'm ready to buy an army."

BEN pushed himself erect. He took a brief turn around the room. He was still scowling. He was shaking his head. This was something he didn't want any part of. It was tough for Jinny Halstead, but it was her problem. Or the sheriff's. It wasn't his.

"Ben," Clara was saying, "I'm going to take a hand in what happens on Grand Mesa. "Don't ask me why. Just tell me you'll help me, or say you won't."

"That's easy," said Ben. "I won't."

"Not for another chance to raise horses?"

"What do you mean?"

"You still have your land, Ben. With a new loan you could buy new stock."

"Not if I was dead, Clara. I'm not the army you need. I'm only one man."

"You could hire others."

"No."

"Are you afraid, Ben? Is that it?"

"Maybe."

The woman bit her lips. She turned away and crossed to her desk and stood there with her back to Ben Rogan, fooling with the papers on its top. Ben scowled at her, wondering what lay behind all this, and why she was so eager to buck Arne Macgregor, and if she realized all that a range war entailed. He shook his head. She couldn't. She had never lived through one.

"I'd like that loan," he heard himself saying. "I'd do almost anything to get it. Almost anything, Clara, but I can't do what you've asked."

The woman swung around to face him. She was smiling, now, and she came swiftly forward and stood close to him, so close he could catch quite distinctly the scent of the perfume she was wearing, so close he could sense the warmth and softness of her body. She laid a hand on his wrist.

Her fingers tightened. "Ben," she whispered. "think it over. How long would it take you, working for wages, to save the money you'd need for a new start. Five years? Ten? You'll be old in ten years, Ben. You won't have the nerve to start out on your own. And what do you owe Arne Macgregor? What about Jinny? Ben, think it over. Come and see me tomorrow."

Ben Rogan suddenly wanted to get out of here. He wanted to get to a place where he could be alone and where he could make a cool appraisal of what had happened. He broke away. He crossed to stand near the settee and picked up his hat.

He moved to the door, opened it, and then looked back at Clara Bane. She stood in the center of the room, still smiling, her eyes clear and direct and warm, and confident.

"Tomorrow, Ben?" she insisted.

"Sure," Ben nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow."

HE STEPPED OUTSIDE and closed the door and stood for a moment on the porch, breathing deeply of the already chill air of the evening and letting his eyes adjust themselves to the darkness of the night. His hand brushed against the gun holstered at his side. He moved down from the porch toward the gate and as he neared it he saw the figure of a man crossing the street, toward him, coming up from the deep shadows of the trees near the river. His heart gave a jump and once more his hand brushed his gun, loosening it in its holster.

Ben came to the gate, opened it, and stopped, facing the man he had seen. A tall man. A man who was a little stooped and whose broad brimmed hat deepened the shadows over his face. A man he didn't recognize.

"Is this where Clara Bane lives?" asked the man.

He had a deep voice, a growling voice. And he was a stranger here. Everyone who lived in or around Los Prados knew the location of the Bane home.

"This is where she lives," Ben answered.

"I reckon she's home," said the man. And he laughed. It was a short laugh. An ugly laugh. Perhaps a mocking laugh.

"Yes," said Ben Rogan. "She's home."

"Thanks, brother," said the man. He pushed forward, stepping through the open gate and brushing past Ben Rogan. He continued on up the walk, climbed the steps of the porch, and knocked on the door.

Ben stood at the gate, watching. He saw the door open and heard the murmur of voices, but couldn't catch what was said. His view of the man against the light of the room told him no more than he already knew. The man was tall, thin, stooped. After a moment at the door he stepped into the room and the door closed.

Wondering about this, Ben moved on up the street toward the Plaza. When he reached it he angled toward the Truitt house, and inside, found Will Truitt, tending bar. Will Truitt was a short, stocky, dark haired man of about forty. He had a pleasant, even temper and a smile for everyone. He lifted his hand in greeting when Ben came in.

"The first one, tonight, is on the house," he offered, pouring a drink. "What's the latest on your horses, Ben?"

"They're gone," said Ben, briefly.

"But maybe you'll still find them."

Ben shook his head. He tossed off the drink Will had poured.

"What'll you do, Ben?" asked Will Truitt.

"I wish I knew."

"They tell me Macgregor's hiring men, but that wouldn't interest you, would it."

"Not much," said Ben, grinning. And then, "Will, I need forty-five dollars."

"Sure thing," said Will Truitt.

He pulled back the apron he was wearing and dug into his pocket. From a thick roll of bills he peeled off four tens and a five. He held them toward Ben. "Sure this is enough?"

"Plenty, Will. Thanks," Ben answered.

He took the money, shoved it into his pocket, and turned back toward the door.

"Hey," called Will Truitt, "don't spend that with my competition."

Ben chuckled. "That's a promise, Will. This money's to clear off a debt. When I buy a drink, it'll be here."

HE STEPPED OUTSIDE and walked to the Dutchman's The Truitt House had been almost empty and there were only three men in the Dutchman's. Paddy Knowles wasn't among them.

"Have you seen Paddy?" Ben asked the man behind the bar.

"Sure, Ben," was the answer. "He took a job with Arne Macgregor and headed for the MAC ranch with some of the boys. He said if you came in to tell you he'd see you later. He said there wasn't any rush about things — whatever that means."

Ben Rogan nodded. He might have expected this from Paddy Knowles. Paddy was as good as they come. Paddy knew he was up against it for cash and wouldn't rush him. He fingered the bills in his pocket, grinning, and feeling the warmth of Paddy's message.

"A drink, Ben?" asked the bartender.

"Some other time," Ben answered.

He stepped outside and headed for the Great Northern hotel, where he had his evening meal. He was one of the late customers and he sat alone at the round table in the back of the room, taking his time and weighing again the proposition Clara Bane had made. There were points he could find in its favor. It was a quick way to make money, if he could live through it. It would save Jinny Halstead's ranch if he could beat Arne Macgregor. And he owed Macgregor nothing. There was no reason not to take the job. In protecting the ear-marked herd and defending the Halstead ranch, he would be operating within the law. Everything was on his side, everything excepting the possibility of coming through it alive.

Ben had a second cup of coffee and then a third. He found himself considering what Arne Macgregor might do to make it tough for Jinny Halstead, to force her to sell out. And what he could do to counter Macgregor's moves, if he took the job. He got to thinking about Clara Bane and puzzling over her motive in bucking Macgregor. There was one easy answer. It could be a struggle between them for power, for the top control in this part of the country. Or it could be something else, something which was hidden.

Ben Rogan pushed back his chair and stood up. He left money on the table to pay for his supper, moved through the side door of the restaurant to the hotel lobby, nodded to the old man on the desk, and stepped out on the porch. There he stayed for a while, talking to a rancher from the lower end of the valley and to Abe Soloman, who ran the Boston store.

Los Prados was unusually quiet tonight. There were few horses in the bank lot or at the tie-rails around the Plaza square. There were few people on the street. The night wasn't so dark as it had been. An almost full moon had come up over the eastern horizon, its bright light thinning the shadows.

Breaking away from the men to whom he had been talking, Ben went back into the hotel, signed up for a room, shoved the key in his pocket and then stepped outside again and walked up the street toward the livery stable to get the bundle he had brought in from the ranch. The stable entrance was set back from the street to provide a work area. Ben cut across it toward Borghoff's office. He didn't see the three men waiting in the darkness close against the stable. He

didn't see them until he was almost to Borghoff's door and until they moved out, blocking his way, covering him with their guns.

AS LONG AS HE LIVED, Ben Rogan would never forget the shock of that moment. He was wholly unprepared for it. He had come to an abrupt stop, every muscle in his body growing rigid.

His holstered gun was only inches from his hand, but he might as well have been unarmed. If he tried to reach it the guns covering him would blast him down. He knew that. He could sense it in the attitude of the three men. They were quite close to him and there was something terribly grim in their silence.

They were Macgregor's men. One he recognized. A man called Chino. A huge, hulking man with shoulders like a bull. They were Macgregor's men, and this gave significance to his earlier run-in with the boss of the MAC ranch. Macgregor must have known of the job Clara Bane meant to offer him. He probably knew he had seen the woman. He had probably guessed he would take the job.

"Take his gun, Jim," ordered one of the men.

The fellow to Ben's left edged around behind him, stepped forward. Ben felt the tug at his holster as his gun was pulled away.

He tried to swallow the lump which seemed to be choking him. "What's this all about?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

"Chino will explain," said the man who was doing the talking. "Go ahead, Chino."

A stinging blow fell across the side of Ben's head, knocking off his hat, half stunning him, driving him forward.

"There's a little help, Chino," said a voice behind him.

A rumbling protest broke from Chino's throat as the big man moved in. He had holstered his gun. His fist whipped straight up at Ben's face and Ben was falling into the blow. He tried to catch himself, tried to swing away, but couldn't. The slap of the blow straightened him. Tears stung against his eyes. He swung wildly at Chino's head, and missed, and his knees caved in and he fell against the man and hung on.

Chino shoved him erect and then chopped down at him with a vicious, side arm blow which seemed to scrape away his cheek. Ben lunged forward but the bigger man stood like a rock wall. He drove his fists into that wall but couldn't dent it.

He heard Chino's rumbling laughter, amused laughter, and he remembered vaguely a fight he had seen about a month ago between Chino and a huge Mexican from down river, and the way Chino had laughed as he had cut the man to pieces with his fists.

That was happening now, only he was taking the place of the Mexican. It was happening now, only tonight there was no one to stop the fight as that other fight had finally been stopped. He was on the ground, then on his knees, then up again. He was on the ground and Chino was bending over him, pullling him to his feet only to smash him down once more.

"Rogan," a voice was saying, a voice which seemed to come from a long way off. "Rogan, can you hear me."

He was on the ground again, lying stretched out on his back. Perhaps he had been unconscious for a while. Ben didn't know. Pain racked through his body. He made an effort to sit up, but couldn't.

"Rogan," said the voice. "Your horse is saddled and tied to the hitching post. When you can make it that far, climb into the saddle and ride. And keep on riding. If we have to do this again, we'll let Chino finish it. Understand?"

Ben Rogan made no answer. He lay there fighting for breath and feeling the stab of pain which came with each breath he drew. A boot nudged him in the ribs.

"Do you think he heard me?" asked the voice.

"Sure," said one of the other men. "He heard you. Let's get away from here."

Again that boot jabbed at him and again Ben heard the voice of the man who seemed to be running things.

"You're getting out of this lucky, Rogan. Fork your horse and ride."

Ben was still silent. He heard the three men move away and later heard the sound of their horses running down the street, a sound which quickly faded into the silence of the night.

III

CLARA BANE ALWAYS REACHED the bank by eight o'clock in the morning. Usually, Ollie Farnsworth was there ahead of her and that was true this morning. He was at the door to let her in. The bank didn't open for business for another half hour.

"It's going to be another hot day, Clara?" Ollie mentioned.

Clara nodded. She said, "Ollie, I expect Ben Rogan in to see me this morning. As soon as he comes, bring him to my office. Are the loan papers on my desk?"

"Yes, but not filled out as to amount."

"I'll take care of that," said Clara.

She crossed to the door to her private office, which, before her husband's death, had been his. It looked just as it had during Stephen Bane's lifetime. The same, worn carpet covered the floor. The same battered desk stood in the middle of the room. The same old prints were on the wall. Clara had made only two concessions to the fact that she was a woman, concessions which were scarcely noticeable. The brass cuspidor, which, during Stephen's lifetime, had stood on the floor at the corner of the desk, had disappeared. And against the back wall stood a washstand and a mirror.

Clara removed her hat and hung it on a nail near the mirror. She fingered her hair a moment, glancing into the mirror as she did so but hardly conscious of the reflection she saw there. She was wondering when Ben would show up. In spite of his refusal to take the job the night before, she was positive he would be in. The bait she had held out to him was too tempting to be refused. The job she had offered, in spite of all it implied, was legitimate.

Turning from the mirror, Clara crossed to the wide window which looked out on the street. The white curtain covering it hid her from those outside, but was no bar to her vision. Where she now stood she had stood many times before and for many an hour, staring out into the street and hating it and hating everyone she saw. The past two years had been bitter years, hard years, harder than the two when she had been Stephen's wife. She had come here, prepared for those years, knowing that she wouldn't be accepted and ready to suffer the ostracism of the town in return for an escape from the life she had known in El Paso, and in other towns like El Paso. She had come here, knowing that Stephen wouldn't live very long, for the doctor who had examined him in El Paso had told her that. She had come here, planning to get away as soon as Stephen died. What he would leave her, she had figured, would pay handsomely for whatever she had to put up with while he lived. And would care for the years ahead.

That had been her plan. To take what money Stephen left her and go east. That had been her plan, and a good plan, but she hadn't held to it. Why she had changed her mind she didn't quite understand, even now. Even after two years of wondering. There had been a delay, of course, in settling his estate. There had been matters upon which Judge Sims had had to consult her. Weeks had passed and gradually Clara had drifted into the active management of the bank.

Or perhaps it hadn't happened gradually and perhaps she hadn't drifted into what she was doing. With the first question presented to her, the question of approving the extension of a loan, she had a chance to hit back at a man whose wife had cut her on the street. She had caught a glimpse of the power that was within her grasp and for a time it had gone to her head.

But not any more. Or at least, not as an instrument of revenge. She had become a good banker. The books would prove it. Right now, the bank was in a more solid position than at the time of Stephen's death. She had learned to work wisely. Even that first loan, which she had refused to extend, had later been granted. To do so had been good business.

Through the curtain Clara watched the Plaza business district wake up to another day. Abe Soloman came trudging up the street to open his store. Will Truitt appeared on the porch of the Truitt House, an apron around his waist, a broom in his hand. The doors to the Mesa saloon stood propped open although the saloon might not have a customer for several hours. Two Mexicans were turning into the feed store and along the board walk past the Boston store, came a woman, a rather

chunky woman in a plain black dress. Belle Waverley.

CLARA walked back to her desk and sat down. She stared thoughtfully at the papers lying there. She was still studying them when there was a knock on the door. She looked up and called, "Come in," and Belle Waverley entered the office.

"Hello, Belle," said Clara.

Belle Waverley nodded, smiling. She closed the door and crossed to the chair at the side of Clara's desk. She was older than Clara, maybe forty-five, maybe fifty. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and a fleshy face, unevenly powdered. She was breathing heavily as though the exertion of the walk from her house on the next corner, had been almost too much.

"Is everything all right, Belle?" asked Clara.

"That man Chino was in again last night, early," said Belle, frowning. "He caused trouble, as usual. The girls are afraid of him. I don't know what would have happened if Arne Macgregor hadn't sent for him."

"Why did Macgregor want him?"

"I don't know. But I do know this. They're starting things off on the mesa with a fire. From what I gather, it's going to be a big one."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Clarice got it from Jim Canby, one of the regular MAC riders."

Clara tapped on her desk with a pencil. Her lips were pressed tightly together. "What else do you know?" she asked finally.

"That's all that's new. They're moving in on the mesa, all right. There's no question of that. Three others from the MAC were in last night. They all boasted of it. What can this fellow Rogan do?"

Clara frowned. "You haven't mentioned Ben Rogan to any of the girls, have you?"

"Of course not, Clara."

"Never tell them anything I tell you, Belle. They might talk too much."

"They're good girls, Clara."

"They still could talk too much."

Belle Waverley shrugged. She got to her feet and turned to the door. As she reached it she stopped and looked back at Clara Bane. "Times are going to be hard for a while," she said, reflectively. "When men fight they aren't interested in women."

"Tell me something," said Clara. "Has Ben Rogan ever stopped in?"

"Not yet," Belle answered.

Clara was frowning as Belle left the room and the frown stayed on her face after she was again alone. She wondered why she had asked Belle that last question. She hadn't known she was going to ask it. The words had just slipped out. And Belle's answer had pleased her. This was annoying, too. She had no interest in Ben Rogan. She had no interest in any man, as a man, and this was not the time to develop one.

JUST BEFORE NOON, Ollie Farnsworth knocked and then opened the door and looked in and said, "Ben's here, Clara."

A brief smile touched Clara's lips. She said, "Send him in, Ollie."

A moment later Ben Rogan stepped into the office and the sight of him wiped the smile from Clara's face and brought her to her feet, both hands tightly clenched. One of Ben's eyes was swollen almost shut and a dark, purple bruise discolored the left side of his face and lifted it out of proportion. His lower lip was puffed, cut, and he hadn't shaved. His beard was darker, heavier than it had been the night before.

"Not a pretty sight, huh," said Ben quietly.

Clara took a long, slow breath. She said, "Ben, what happened?"

"The fight you wanted, got started ahead of time."

"Where? How?"

"Here in town, last night. There were three of them, Clara, though one might have been enough. Chino did most of the damage. It looks to me as though Macgregor knows what you're planning."

Clara shook her head, but not at Ben's statement. She had made a mistake, she realized, in taking Belle Waverley too deeply into her confidence. In spite of what Belle had said, she must have mentioned Ben's name to one of her girls. And the girl must have passed the story on to someone who worked for Macgregor.

This was something to remember, to

guard against in the future, or perhaps to use.

"Ben," she said slowly, "I wish it hadn't happened. I wish——"

"Hell, woman! You wanted a fight, didn't you?" said Ben, roughly. "Well, I tell you, it's started."

The violence in his voice startled her. She stared at him, wide eyed. She had picked him to lead the fight against Macgregor, picked him deliberately. She had thought she had seen in him the qualities which were necessary, stubbornness, physical strength, courage, an instinctive dislike of the man who ran the MAC ranch. A reaction like this was what she would have wanted, yet it was almost frightening.

BEN moved up to the desk and leaned there. He had spent the night in one of the empty stalls of Borghoff's stable, had been there until a few minutes ago. His clothing smelled of it but he had given that little thought. His head throbbed painfully and his legs still weren't very steady. But they were steady enough. They had brought him here. They would take him back to the Truitt House and then to his horse and he could sit a saddle for a while after that. Yes, his legs were steady enough.

"There's a paper I want, Clara," said Ben Rogan. "I mean, two papers."

"Yes, Ben."

"The court order, naming me custodian of the bank's ear-marked cattle."

"I have it, Ben."

"And a loan agreement, approved and signed, and specifying that payments on the loan are not to start for a year and a half."

Clara Bane nodded. "We haven't discussed the amount of the loan, Ben."

"It will be for five thousand dollars."

"As much as that?"

"Yes, as much as that. Good brood mares cost money. Good stallions come high. You've seen my books, Clara. You know how much money I had tied up in the horses I lost. The loan will be for five thousand dollars, payable to me in sixty days, if I live that long."

Clara bit her lips. "You drive a hard bargain."

"But you made the terms."

Clara Bane sat down at her desk. She filled in the blank spaces on the loan agreement which Ollie Farnsworth had drawn up and signed as witness. She scribbled her own name in approval and handed the agreement to Ben Rogan, then handed him the letter from Judge Sims, the court order.

Ben scanned both papers, then folded them and put them in his pocket. "I'll need forty-five dollars," he said bluntly. "The forty-five will be a personal loan. I'll pay it back, too, if I live."

Clara took forty-five dollars from the cash drawer in her desk. She held it out to Ben Rogan, who put it in his pocket.

"You'll need more money," she suggested. "You'll need men to help you."

"If I need men I'll find them," said Ben. "If I need more money, I'll ask for it."

He turned and left the bank and angled across the Plaza toward the Truitt House, limping slightly as he walked. Will Truitt was inside, still cleaning up. He looked around as Ben entered. Looked around and then straightened and caught his breath and stared at Ben, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Lord, Ben," he asked under his breath. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing I won't recover from," said Ben Rogan.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He gave Truitt the money. "There's ninety dollars there," he mentioned. "Half of it is yours. The other half I owe to Paddy Knowles. See that he gets it the first time he comes to town."

"Sure," said Will, nodding. "I'll take care of it, Ben."

"Here's another thing I'd like you to do," Ben continued. "Put this paper in your safe. Keep it for me."

He handed over the loan agreement he had received from Clara Bane. Will took it, and without unfolding it, turned and rounded the bar, opened his safe, and put the paper inside. He was scowling when he straightened up. "What happened, Ben?" he asked again.

"It was just a skirmish, Will," said Ben Rogan. "The main fight will come off later. Maybe you'll hear about it."

He tried grinning as he said that but the grin didn't come off very well. His lips

were too puffed.

"Look here, Ben," said Will Truitt. "If you're in trouble, you've got friends. If there's anything I can do——"

Ben managed the grin this time. He said, "Thanks, Will. I'll let you know," and turned back toward the street.

BEN had a late breakfast at the hotel, then moved on to the livery stable where Ezra Borghoff had his horse saddled and where Ollie Farnsworth was waiting to see him. Ollie had a message from Clara Bane. In delivering it, he was careful not to be overheard by Borghoff.

"Clara says to watch out for a fire in the timber," said Ollie. "A big fire. Probably back toward the hills."

Ben nodded. He said, "Ollie, do you know what this is all about?"

"I've seen it coming for a long time," said Ollie Farnsworth.

"You mean the fight for the mesa?"

"No. I don't mean that."

"Then what do you mean?"

Ollie blinked. He shook his head. "I spoke out of turn, Ben. Forget it."

"You mean the fight between Clara Bane and Arne Macgregor. That's what you've seen coming, isn't it."

Ollie Farnsworth shook his head. A scowl had gathered on his face. He was silent for a moment and Ben had the feeling that he was thoughtfully considering what answer to make. When it came it surprised him by its intensity.

"Ben," said Ollie Farnsworth, "what ever you can do for Clara, do it. She's not what they say. Not for a minute. A finer woman never lived."

Ben grunted. He didn't quite know what answer to make. There had been almost a pleading note in Ollie's voice. It occurred to him to wonder what Ollie's wife would think about the statement Ollie had just made. Edith Farnsworth was a tall, thin, gaunt, fearful looking woman, who, according to all the stories he had heard, hadn't entered the bank since Steve Bane's death, and had never spoken to Steve's widow.

"One more thing," said Ollie. "Don't trust Frank Van Dusen. That's my own suggestion."

"Who's Frank Van Dusen?" Ben asked.

"He works for Jinny Halstead."

"Anything else?" asked Ben.

Ollie mopped a hand over his face. "I've already said too much, Ben. I—maybe I'd better go."

He scurried away, walking as he always did, hurriedly and leaning a little forward, his shoulders hunched, his long arms swinging.

Ben watched him for a moment, wondering about him, and a little surprised at his curiosity. It had never before occurred to him to wonder about Ollie Farnsworth, about what kind of life he lived, about what kind of man he was. Ollie had always before now been just a clerk in the bank. He had suddenly become an individual.

BEN ROGAN headed out across country in a general north-easterly direction upon leaving Los Prados. He could have taken the road which followed the Rio Penasco and which was a more direct route to Grand Mesa, but on the road he might have met riders heading for town, and particularly riders from Macgregor's MAC ranch. The MAC ranch was south of Grand Mesa and south of the river, which curved along the mesa's lower bluff.

The sun was hot overhead, and the stiffness in his body, largely a result of the beating he had taken the night before, made every moment unpleasant. But the stiffness would pass. The ride would end. And with another twilight, the heat of the day would vanish.

This range he was crossing now belonged to a man named Oldfield, a gruff, sullen fellow whom Ben had never come to know very well. He passed within sight of the Oldfield ranch but saw no one near it. By this time he was heading almost directly west and squinting into the sun he could make out the low ridge of the mesa, a ridge which would look much higher when he got to it and which in places was impossible to climb.

He was wearing his father's gun, the old, single action, Frontier model, Colt .45. The man who had taken his gun in the stable yard the night before, apparently had kept it. But the old Colt was a good weapon. It would do. And his rifle was still in its saddle boot.

Ben climbed his horse to the mesa at

a point midway along its eastern wall. He then rode along the barbed wire fence, guarding the bluff, to a place where the fence sagged and could be crossed. Here he took the time to tighten the wires and afterwards rolled a smoke and scanned the uneven plateau which men called Grand Mesa. It wasn't a flat country. It had gulleys and hills and was rather wooded. The grass wasn't as good as on the flats below and there was no natural water, anywhere. Halstead had found water for his cattle by sinking wells.

There could be only one good reason why Arne Macgregor wanted the mesa. To the north and west were high, thick forests of yellow pine. Without any question, the mesa's timber was of greater value than its grazing land. Sam Halstead had recognized this. He had planned a sawmill, but Sam Halstead had been more of a dreamer and planner than man of action. The sawmill had never been built.

Ben Rogan forked his horse once more and started across the mesa in the general direction of the Halstead ranch house. He was scowling and shaking his head as he remembered Ollie Farnsworth's message. It had warned of a fire. A big fire. But if Arne Macgregor wanted the mesa for its timber it didn't stand to reason that he would start a fire in the forests he would someday want to cut and saw and sell. Ollie's warning had come through Clara Bane. And where had Clara secured her information?

Ben passed several small herds of cattle. Whether or not any of them were the ear-marked cattle which now belonged to the bank and which he was supposed to protect, he didn't know and didn't take the time to discover. Those ear-marked cattle, anyhow, in his own judgment, weren't very important. They served only as an excuse for putting him here.

FROM the top of a low hill some half dozen miles from the mesa bluff Ben Rogan looked down on the sprawling buildings of the Halsead ranch. The main house was a low, L-shaped structure, built of logs and with a shake roof. Near it was a square building, a bunk-house for such men as worked here, never very many. The barn was built of logs and was long and narrow and stood at right angles to the other buildings, with them forming a V. At the wide end of the V was a wood fence corral and in the open yard between it and the houses Ben could see the covered well and the rounded mound of a storage cellar. Near the houses were several clumps of trees.

Ben had been here several times before, the last time to attend the funeral of Sam Halstead, whose grave was in the shade of the largest group of trees. He remembered that day very well and his few glimpses of Jinny Halstead. He hadn't talked to her. He knew her only casually. She was a thin girl, not very tall, just over twenty. On the occasion of her father's funeral she had seemed tired, listless, completely overwhelmed by the tragedy of what had happened. And riding forward now Ben puzzled over why she had refused Arne Macgregor's offer for the mesa, why she wanted to hang onto this land, and if she had guessed to what extent Arne Macgregor would go to have his way. The latter, at least, didn't seem possible.

There was no one in the yard when Ben rounded the corner of the house and pulled up, but as he swung to the ground a voice spoke to him from the direction of the barn, a harsh voice, a grating voice.

"Stand right where you are, Mister. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Ben's hands were still on the saddle horn. He let go of it and turned slightly to face the barn, keeping his hands shoulder high. He saw Gus Durango standing in the barn's half open doorway, a rifle in his hands. He was a short, stooped, grey-haired man, always seemingly in need of a shave. He had worked on the mesa a good many years, almost from the time Halstead had settled here.

"Sure, Gus," said Ben easily. "What's wrong?"

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement at the bunk house door. A man had appeared there. A man also covering him with a rifle. And someone had come out on the ranch house porch. Jinny Halstead. She was wearing old levis and a faded blue shirt. In her hands a third rifle was pointed at him.

"I give up," said Ben, grinning.

Gus Durango had lowered his rifle. "I

didn't recognize you, Ben," he mumbled. "We thought—that is—"

His voice trailed off and he looked at Jinny Halstead. Jinny was frowning. She looked tense. Gus Durango's apparent acceptance of Ben as a friend didn't seem to have impressed her.

"What do you want?" Jinny asked. "Why have you come here?"

Her voice was sharp and had an edge to it. Her lips made a thin, tight line across the narrow, tanned oval of her face. She had straw-colored hair, parted in the middle and caught loosely in a bun on the back of her neck. Her eyes were blue, a deep blue, a steady blue, a questioning blue. Facing her, Ben Rogan had an immediate answer to one of the questions which had puzzled him. Jinny Halstead knew what she was up against in refusing to sell the mesa to Macgregor. This reception proved it.

"I have a letter in my pocket," said Ben, slowly. "The letter will partly explain why I'm here."

"Frank," called Jinny Halstead. "Get the letter. Read it."

THE MAN who was standing in the door of the bunkhouse set down his rifle, loosened the gun in his holster, and then moved toward Ben. And Ben, recalling that last warning which Ollie Farnsworth had given him, the warning not to trust Frank Van Dusen, studied the man curiously. Frank Van Dusen was tall, heavy, thick bodied, almost fat. He had wide shoulders and long, powerful arms. His hair was quite black and his face, deep tanned, square, and scowling. The man's age Ben guessed at somewhere under forty. He held out his hand for the letter when he came to where Ben was waiting and his eyes, hard and black, looked straight at Ben. There was arrogance in this Frank Van Dusen. Ben could sense it. Arrogance, self-confidence, and possibly a ruthless drive which could become violent.

"Let's see the letter," said Van Dusen.

Ben handed it to him and stood watching him as he read it. The scowl on Van Dusen's face deepened as the meaning of the words struck home, deepened and then turned into a curiously speculative look.

"What does it say?" asked Jinny Halstead.

"It's a letter from Judge Sims," Van Dusen reported. "It says that by court order, Ben Rogan has been named as custodian of the cattle which have been ear-marked for the bank, and is responsible for their delivery to market."

"And what does that mean?"

Van Dusen looked at Ben Rogan. He said, "Yeah, what does it mean?"

"It means," said Ben, "that I'm to look after the ear-marked cattle and see that nothing happens to them. That's why I'm here."

He had used the wrong words. He knew that the minute he had finished speaking. He knew it by the way Jinny stiffened and lifted the barrel of her rifle. He shouldn't have explained it so directly. He had made it sound as though Jinny wasn't to be trusted.

"Climb your horse, Ben Rogan," said Jinny Halstead. "Take that letter back to the woman who gave it to you and tell her the ear-marked cattle will be delivered to her any day she wants them, not a one missing. Climb your horse and ride."

Too many people had been giving Ben the same advice. His jaw tightened. He shook his head.

"Now wait a minute, Jinny," said Gus Durango. "Ben's all right. He—"

"Tell him to ride out of here."

"But why, Jinny?" asked the old man, puzzled. "This puts him on our side. We're going to need all the help we can get."

"But not his kind of help, Gus. Don't you see what she wants. Clara Bane wants the mesa as much as Macgregor. Ben Rogan is only the first man she will be sending in to look after her cattle. There will be others. We will be caught between them and Macgregor's men. Tell him to ride."

Ben Rogan was still shaking his head. "I'm the only one Clara's sending in," he said slowly. "To me, this is just a job, and I need it. And what's more, I'm tired of riding. For a spell, I'm going to sit."

HE TURNED to his horse, untied his bundle from behind his saddle, shouldered it and started for the bunk house. He didn't know what Jinny Halstead would do, whether she would use her rifle or not. He didn't know what Frank

Van Dusen's attitude would be or how Gus Durango would line up if Jinny tried to enforce her order. He took a quick glance at her. She had lowered her rifle but was still standing rigid, biting her lips.

"Frank," she said suddenly. "Come here. You too, Gus."

Ben moved on to the bunk house. He entered it, tossed his bundle on one of the bunks and then sprawled out on another. He hadn't handled this very well, but then perhaps it couldn't have been handled well. Perhaps it was in the cards that Jinny should resent the appointment of someone to look after the ear-marked cattle. And particularly if there was any basis for her suspicions of Clara Bane.

This consideration troubled him. Clara had suggested that he would need men to fight Macgregor. She had offered to supply them. And she had refused to explain her feud with Macgregor. She had said to him, *"I'm going to take a hand in what happens on Grand Mesa. Don't ask me why."* Did Jinny have the answer? Was Clara Bane in a contest with Macgregor for the rich timber on the mesa? And was it his part, with Macgregor, to force Jinny to sell?

Ben shook his head. That wasn't the way he looked at it. That wasn't why he was here. He closed his eyes and tried to relax but a nagging uneasiness wouldn't let him. He had jumped into this, he decided, too fast, and before he knew all the angles. He had jumped into it in the heat of his anger at what had happened to him in front of Borghoff's stable, and because he disliked Macgregor, and because of the bait Clara had held out to him, the chance for a new start on his own.

He heard footsteps outside and he opened his eyes and sat up. Gus Durango and Frank Van Dusen appeared at the doorway and then came on into the room. The older man was scowling. Van Dusen was tight lipped, watchful. One hand rested on his holstered gun.

"I'm sorry, Ben," said Gus Durango, "but it's no use. We both talked to her and tried to make her see it our way, but she won't. Women can be gosh-awful stubborn. You've got to leave."

Ben shook his head. "That letter I showed you constitutes a court order."

"I told her that," said Gus. "Or rather, Frank did. It makes no difference. She says that if Judge Sims wants to enforce his order he'll have to come out to the mesa, personally. She's dead certain you're here to push in for Clara Bane."

"I'm not, Gus."

"That's what we told her, but Jinny is still the boss."

Frank Van Dusen had nodded to all this but Ben had the distinct feeling that Van Dusen wasn't displeased.

"We'll have to start riding right now," Gus continued. "It'll be dark in another hour. We'll go with you as far as the bluff."

IV

BEN ROGAN SAT THERE ON the bunk for a moment, studying the faces of these two men, the wrinkled, scowling, age worn face of Gus Durango and the darker, smoother, almost handsome face of Frank Van Dusen. He remembered, now, that Jinny had called Van Dusen to come and read the letter, rather than Gus. And this seemed strange. Gus Durango had been around so long he must have been almost as familiar to Jinny as her father. Van Dusen, he felt sure, was new to this part of the country.

"Let's get started, Ben," said Gus Durango insistantly. "Van Dusen and I want to get back here before dark."

"And you can't trust me to leave alone?" Ben asked.

"We told Jinny we'd ride with you to the bluff."

"Suppose I come back," said Ben. "After dark."

"Folks riding the mesa after dark are liable to get shot at," Gus answered. "I wouldn't turn back if I was you."

Ben Rogan shrugged his shoulders. He stood up and crossed to the door and as he reached it, Van Dusen spoke. "You're forgetting your bundle. Rogan."

This was Van Dusen's first comment since he and Gus Durango had returned from their conference with Jinny Halstead It was a drawled comment with faint, sarcastic overtones.

"That's right," said Ben. "I am."

He stepped outside and started toward

the ranch house and behind him, Van Dusen called, "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

Ben made no answer to that. He didn't look back. He kept straight on toward the ranch house, his feet scuffing up a trail of dust. He heard Gus Durango mutter something and heard Van Dusen's angry reply, but he didn't catch the words.

The slanting rays of the sun were driving straight at him. Ben ducked his head against the bright glare, then straightened as he came into the shade of the house and reached the porch. He climbed the steps and crossed to the door. Jinny Halstead had gone back inside, and if she had seen him coming, wasn't there to meet him. Ben pulled off his hat. He knocked on the door and stood there waiting, and wishing he looked more presentable.

The door was opened almost immediately by Jinny Halstead, an unsmiling Jinny Halstead whose eyes were as cold and frosty as a clear winter sky. She wasn't a tall girl. Standing stiff and straight, the top of her head came only a little higher than Ben's chin.

"I want to talk to you for a minute, Jinny," said Ben Rogan.

Jinny stepped out on the porch. She looked toward the steps. "What is this man doing here, Gus?" she demanded. "I thought you were going to ride him to the bluff."

Gus Durango and Frank Van Dusen had followed Ben from the bunk house. They were now standing near the steps.

"Well?" Jinny insisted.

"I reckon maybe he wants to explain things, Jinny," said Gus Durango.

Jinny shook her head. "I'll hear no explanations. I said, ride him to the bluff."

Frank Van Dusen moved forward. His hand was again on his holstered gun. "You heard her, Rogan," he said. "Let's go."

BEN ROGAN stood where he was, scowling, paying no attention to Van Dusen. His eyes were on Jinny Halstead. He wished he knew her better, knew how to appeal to her, how to break through the stubborn resistance of her pride, or to overcome her deep suspicions of Clara Bane.

"Why won't you listen to me?" he asked slowly. "What are you afraid of?"

"She sent you, didn't she?" said Jinny.

"Clara Bane? Yes."

"She wants the mesa."

"Maybe she does," Ben shrugged. "But that's not why I'm here."

"I suppose you want me to believe you're here to ride herd on those ear-marked cattle?"

"That's part of my job."

"And what's the rest of it?"

"Macgregor."

"You mean you'd fight him."

"If it comes to that."

"But you take your orders from Clara Bane."

Ben shook his head. "All the orders I have or recognize are in the letter from Judge Sims. I'm here to see that nothing happens to a herd of ear-marked cattle. If Macgregor starts something which might result in danger to that herd, I'm supposed to protect it."

Jinny seemed puzzled. She was frowning, shaking her head. Suddenly she stretched out her hand. "Let's see that letter."

Ben dug the letter from his pocket and gave it to her and while she read it he glanced at Gus Durango and Van Dusen. Durango nodded to him, seeming pleased. Van Dusen was still wearing his tight-lipped scowl.

After Jinny had read the letter she passed it back. "If I recognize this court order and agree to it," she said slowly, "what will you do? The ear-marked herd is in the high north meadow."

"But maybe some have strayed away," Ben suggested.

"I doubt it."

"It's a possibility, anyhow," said Ben. "I think what I'd do, for a while, would be to ride with Gus and Van Dusen and casually keep an eye open for strays."

"What do you think, Gus?" asked Jinny.

"Ben and I would get along," said Gus Durango.

"What about you, Frank?"

Van Dusen shrugged his shoulders. "Anything you say, Jinny."

The girl took a slow, deep breath. She looked straight at Ben, and her eyes were no more friendly than they had been when she came to the door a few minutes before. "All right," she nodded. "We'll try it for a day, Rogan. We'll see what happens."

Ben grinned at her blunt use of his last name. He grinned in spite of the way the grin hurt his cracked and swollen lips. In calling him Rogan the girl was expressing her defiance of the order which had brought him here and was letting him know how thin was his welcome.

IN THE BARN, Ben cared for his horse, rubbing him down, and afterwards forking fresh hay into the bin in one of the empty stalls. As he worked at this task, Van Dusen stood in the doorway, watching him, still frowning, and obviously not too well pleased at what had happened. Ben finished and turned away. He joined Van Dusen, rolled a smoke, and offered Van Dusen his tobacco and papers.

Van Dusen curtly shook his head. "Some other time, Rogan."

"Sure," said Ben, easily.

He leaned against the frame of the door, lit his cigaret, and inhaled deeply.

"Gus says you've lived around here quite a spell," Van Dusen mentioned.

"A few years, more or less," Ben admitted.

"You had a place of your own."

"And got rustled out of it."

Van Dusen pushed back his hat. He said, "Rogan, why did you come here? What's back of this job? What's behind the court order you carry?"

"What's back or behind anything?" Ben countered. "The drive that makes it necessary, I suppose. Clara Bane wanted protection for a herd of cattle here on the mesa. I needed a job."

"That's not all."

"It's enough."

"No." Van Dusen was shaking his head. "It's not enough."

Ben made no comment. He stared at this man who was facing him. He had never seen him before today. Had never heard of him until Ollie Farnsworth mentioned his name. It was his guess that Van Dusen hadn't been here long. The Grand Mesa ranch was shoulder deep in trouble. It took one of two things to hold men on the job under such circumstances. A loyalty which was born of long service. Or wages high enough to make the risk worth while. Van Dusen didn't qualify through long service and Ben doubted that Jinny Halstead was yet hiring gunmen. That left Van Dusen high and dry—and unexplained. A man to be watched.

Gus Durango joined them, grinning at Ben and mopping a hand over his face. "Today has sure been a scorcher," he mentioned. "I'll be glad when the weather breaks."

He moved inside the door of the barn, squatted down on his heels away from the sun, pulled a plug of tobacco from his pocket and gnawed off a corner. He said, "Ben, you've bought yourself a fair sized chunk of trouble."

"It looks that way, doesn't it," Ben nodded. "How many of us are there?"

"You and I, Van Dusen and Jinny, and the two Crandall boys. And don't fail to count Jinny. She could ride a horse before she could walk and her old man taught her to use a six-gun and rifle. He said to me many times that Jinny should have been born a boy. I reckon maybe he was right."

"How far have things gone?" Ben asked.

"Far enough, but not too far. Macgregor was here with half a dozen of his men, day before yesterday. He talked to Jinny alone. I didn't hear what was said, but according to Jinny he was a little rough. He made what he said was his last offer for the ranch. He told her she could have a few days to think it over. Jinny told him to get off the mesa and stay off. I heard that. Everyone did. She told him from the porch before Macgregor and his men rode away. He didn't like it."

"What do you expect him to do, Gus?"

THE OLD MAN shrugged. "It's a long ways out here from town, a long ways from the sheriff's office. I reckon maybe he could try to do most anything, Ben. He's a smart man, but, even smart men can make mistakes. He's made a serious one already."

"What's that?"

"Jinny Halstead. He figured she would be easy to handle. He forgot a woman can be more stubborn than a mule, even a woman who don't weigh a hundred pounds."

"Why won't she sell the mesa, Gus?"

"Two good reasons," Gus chuckled. "First, she don't want to. This has been her home all her life. I reckon maybe she doesn't want to leave. Second, Mac-

gregor hasn't offered a decent price."

"Did Clara Bane make a bid for the ranch?"

Gus nodded soberly. "A week ago, in Los Prados, Clara Bane told Jinny she would top Macgregor's offer by ten percent, no matter what his offer was. Jinny told Clara she wasn't interested."

Ben considered this for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. It might mean something, it might not. If the price was low enough, this land would be a good investment for anyone.

Frank Van Dusen had been listening to all this without comment. Now he suddenly straightened and turned away, angling across the yard toward the bunk house.

Ben watched him for a moment, then glanced at Gus Durango. "What about him, Gus?" he asked bluntly. "Where does Van Dusen fit into the picture? How long has he been here?"

"Six months. Maybe a little longer."

"Is he a good man?"

"So—so."

"Will he stick?"

"You never know things like that about a man until the going gets tough, but I think Jinny will hold him."

"Jinny?"

"Yep. Couldn't you see it? He's after Jinny, all right, but Jinny's a pretty sensible girl."

Ben had finished his cigaret long ago. He leaned back against the inside frame of the barn door, rolling another, deliberately smoothing it, scowling.

"Where's he from?" he asked finally.

"Down Texas way. Or so he says."

"Does he ride into town very often?"

"Not too often."

Ben stared thoughtfully into the deepening shadows of the barn. This told him a little, but not enough. Ollie Farnsworth's warning still bothered him. He needed to know the basis for it, needed to know why Ollie had said Frank Van Dusen wasn't to be trusted.

JINNY HALSTEAD paced back and forth across the front room of her home. It was a pleasant front room. It was nicely furnished but everything in it was so familiar to her she was unaware of it. She was wondering if she had done the right thing in telling Ben Rogan he could stay. She wasn't at all sure she had.

Standing for a time behind the curtains at the front window and staring out into the yard, Jinny recalled what she knew of Ben Rogan. She had seen him on several occasions when he had ridden by here to see her father on the way from his ranch to town. Her father, she remembered, had seemed to like him, but then her father, in spite of his many good qualities, had been notoriously poor in his judgment of character. Sam Halstead had liked almost everyone, had been able to see something good in everyone. He had even been one of the few men who had been generous in his attitude toward Clara Bane. *"Maybe she did come out of a dive in El Paso,"* she had heard him say long ago when he had been talking to Gus. *"And maybe she's just a chippy, but she's given Steve Bane the companionship he's missed for a long time."* That had been when Steve was still alive. And after Steve's death and after Clara Bane had actively taken over management of the bank, her father had seemed to take a real enjoyment in many of the things she did.

Jinny frowned as she thought of Clara Bane. She didn't like the woman. She never had. And she tried, now, to test, honestly, the reasons for her dislike. She didn't think, or want to think, that the reason for her dislike had anything to do with Clara's background. But she wasn't sure. Perhaps she was like some of the other people who didn't like Clara because Clara wasn't good.

The frown on Jinny's face grew deeper. She shook her head. That wasn't why she disliked Clara Bane. She didn't care at all what Clara had been. In fact, she hadn't felt any dislike, hadn't felt anything, hadn't had an opinion until Clara had offered to buy the Grand Mesa ranch. That was what was at the bottom of it. Clara had assumed, just as everyone else, that she would sell. Clara, although assuming a man's role herself in the management of her husband's bank, had looked on her as a woman who couldn't run a ranch. That was what had hurt.

JINNY moved back to the big chair in the far corner of the room. Her father's chair. She sat down in it, leaned back. Her slender body didn't nearly fit

it but she could run a ranch. She knew she could. That is, she could run this ranch if people would leave her alone, give her a chance. There wasn't a job on it she couldn't do. She could ride, rope, herd cattle. She could use a gun if she had to. During the past five years, since her mother's death, she had been her father's almost constant saddle companion. She knew ranching, and nothing else. Why, should she sell out and go to her father's people in Texas, people she hardly knew?

There was a knock on the front door. Jinny got to her feet and answered it. Gus Durango stood on the porch. Ben Rogan was with him.

"What is it, Gus?" Jinny asked.

"Jed Crandall just rode in," Gus answered. "Macgregor's on his way here. There are six men with him."

Jinny's lips tightened. "My answer to him will be the same as last time."

"Sure, Jinny," Gus nodded. "Jed and I will cover from the barn. Van Dusen from the bunk house. Ben wants to be here with you. I think it's a good idea"

"Why?" asked Jinny, instantly antagonistic.

"It's like this," said Gus. "Ben Rogan represents the bank. He wants to step out on the porch after the talking starts. I think it's a good idea. It may come as a shock to Macgregor. It may make him think a little harder when he realizes he's got Clara Bane to buck as well as us."

"I don't like it," said Jinny.

Gus Durango shrugged his shoulders. "We don't have much time to talk, Jinny. You've sat in on some of our poker games. In this deal, Ben's our hole card. Let's see how good a hole card we have."

As though it was settled, Gus turned away and hurried toward the barn and Ben Rogan moved past her and stepped into the house. Jinny frowned. She looked at him thoughtfully, wondering what had caused the bruises on his face and then forgetting that and wondering why he was here and what the exact relationship was between him and Clara Bane. He had a ranch north and west of her. She knew that. He had lost all his horses to some rustlers. She had heard the story. And perhaps he owed the bank money. Perhaps that explained Clara Bane's hold on him. and why he had come here.

"I want no trouble with Macgregor," said Jinny. "He offered to buy the ranch. I refused to sell. He said he would give me a few days to think over his offer. I will tell him, when he gets here, that I still don't mean to sell. And I don't want you starting anything, Rogan."

Ben Rogan grinned at her. It was a twisted, crooked grin. It made his face look horrible. "I'll not start anything," he promised.

"You mean that?"

"Of course."

Jinny bit her lips. She had seen Ben Rogan here at the ranch several times. She had seen him on a few occasions in town. He had never paid much attention to her, but that signified nothing. *"He's a lone wolf,"* her father had said of Ben Rogan, *"Women mean nothing to him."* And perhaps in this her father had been right.

Jinny heard the faint sound of hoofbeats. She crossed to the window and looked through the curtain. Arne Macgregor accompanied by a group of his men, was riding into the yard. She recognized most of his men. Breck Hollister. Matt Billings. Tow Walsh. The big fellow known only as Chino. Frowning and aware of a growing excitement, Jinny moved back to the door. She glanced at Ben Rogan, sensing the tension which gripped him.

"Remember," she said sharply. "I want no trouble."

Ben nodded. "Most people don't."

Still frowning Jinny opened the door and stepped out on the porch. She left the door partially open.

V

THROUGH THE WINDOW, BEN Rogan watched the group ride into the yard and pull up near the house. He recognized Arne Macgregor, Breck Hollister, Matt Billings and Chino. There were two other men whom he knew by sight, but not by name. Six men altogether. According to Jed Crandall there had been seven in the group.

For a moment, Ben's scowling glance rested on Chino, who seemed to squat in the saddle rather than sit there, whose huge shoulders sagged forward as though dragged down by the weight of his arms. One of Chino's eyes was puffed, swollen,

and Ben took what satisfaction he could from the apparent fact that one of his wild punches in the stable-yard fight had slammed home. Perhaps, if the fight had been fair, he could have done more than mark one of Chino's eyes. Chino was a slow, lumbering fellow. He might have the strength of an ox, but if a man kept away from him, kept away from the crushing power of his arms, kept stabbing at his face, he mght have a chance.

Turning from Chino, Ben looked at Arne Macgregor, who had dismounted and passed the reins of his horse to Breck Hollister. Macgregor said something to Hollister, who nodded and gave a short answer, then Macgregor started toward the porch, his shoulders squared, his bearing confident. He was smiling, as though this was just a friendly call, a casual visit from a neighbor. Those who had come with him sat quietly on their horses and in a compact group, as though anticipating no trouble. If the possibility of trouble had been in their minds, they would have spread out more.

Ben left the window and came back to the partially open door. He stood there, out of sight of Jinny and Macgregor, listening.

"Hello, Jinny," said Macgregor. "Mind if I come in for a while? I'd like to talk to you."

"You can say what you have to say, out here," Jinny answered, and her voice was sharp, unfriendly.

Macgregor's footsteps sounded on the porch steps, then on the porch. A low chuckle reached Ben's ears, and then Macgregor's voice, holding a faint note of amusement. "Now Jinny, don't be like that. After all, I'm here to do you a favor."

"I have a different word for it," said Jinny Halstead.

"Maybe, but you're not looking at things right, Jinny. Ranching is a man's job. It's not for a girl. A pretty girl."

"Thanks, Mr. Macgregor," said Jinny. "It's nice to hear that I'm pretty."

"Of course you are, Jinny."

"Quite pretty, Mr. Macgregor?"

"Like a picture."

"Then maybe I can get a man, Mr. Macgregor. A man who will marry me. A man who can run a ranch."

A moment of silence followed. Ben Rogan grinned, forgetting his cracked and swollen lips. It was a neat trap into which Macgregor had fallen. Right now, Macgregor probably felt a little uncomfortable. But he made a fairly quick recovery.

"Now look here, Jinny. You wouldn't want to marry a man just to get someone to run the ranch."

"Why not?" asked Jinny. "If it takes a man to run a ranch, why shouldn't I marry one?"

"You're just talking, Jinny."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

MACGREGOR cleared his throat and when he spoke again his voice was heavier and held a note of impatience.

"Let's quit beating around the bush, Jinny. I've made you a fair offer for the ranch. Quite a fair offer. A cash offer. Where else could you find someone with the cash to pay?"

"I don't know," Jinny replied. "I haven't shopped around, Mr. Macgregor. You see, the Grand Mesa ranch isn't for sale. That's all there is to it. There's no point in arguing with me. If you offered twice as much, all in gold, wrapped up in blue tissue paper and tied with a red ribbon, my answer would be the same. The Grand Mesa ranch is not for sale. Not for sale at any price."

"But Jinny—"

"That's all, Mr. Macgregor. I'm sorry we can't invite you and your men to stay for supper. It's getting late. Maybe you'd better ride."

"No!"

The word was violent. It slapped out with all the weight of Macgregor's anger and frustration.

"No! You'll listen to reason, Jinny. You'll listen to what I've got to say!"

Ben Rogan waited no longer. He pulled the door wide open. He stepped out on the porch. Macgregor, at the top of the porch steps, saw him the minute he appeared. Saw him and stiffened.

"Hello, Macgregor," said Ben quietly.

He stepped to one side and leaned back against the wall of the house, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt. Beyond Macgregor he could see the men in the yard. Several were leaning forward, peering at him. And now in the barn door, as though answering some signal, Gus Durango and Jed Crandall stepped into sight and in the door of the bunk house, Frank Van

Dusen appeared. Van Dusen had a rifle under his arm. Gus Durango and Crandall were armed only with their six-guns.

Macgregor didn't immediately notice these other men, but those who had come with him did. They sat now more rigidly in their saddles, their hands close to their guns. One man, whose name Ben didn't know, backed his horse a little away from the others. Breck Hollister, who was holding the reins of Macgregor's horse, started gnawing at his lips.

Macgregor's eyes still reflected the shock he had felt at Ben Rogan's sudden appearance. His face had darkened. After a long look at Ben Rogan he glanced at Jinny, then at Ben, and then once more at the girl.

"What's this man doing here?" he asked harshly.

"Who?" asked Jinny. "Rogan?"

"Yes. Rogan."

"Why?" asked Jinny. "Shouldn't he be here?"

"No."

Jinny shrugged her shoulders, but it wasn't an indifferent shrug. She was watching Macgregor quite closely. "Maybe you'd like to do something about it, Mr. Macgregor," she suggested. "But before you do, take a look at the barn, and the bunk house."

Macgregor moistened his lips. He turned and stared toward the barn and then toward the bunk house, then again at Ben and finally at Jinny Halstead.

"Carol Bane sent him here," he exploded.

"That's right," said Jinny. "And there's nothing I can do about it. He's here by court order."

"So you're playing that woman's game."

"I'm playing no game, Mr. Macgregor. I'm merely running cattle on a ranch I own. I keep busy. I'm cook as well as owner and if I don't get back to the kitchen, supper might burn. I think you and your men had better ride."

MACGREGOR was silent for a moment. He was still looking at Jinny and what his thoughts were, Ben couldn't guess. But anger was still riding the man, anger which kept the scowl on his face and deep flushed color in his cheeks, and which quickened his breathing. Anger, and perhaps an acceptance of the fact that more stern measures were required to overcome this girl's resistance than any he had yet used. Then abruptly, Macgregor reached some decision. He straightened, nodded, and said, "We'll go, Jinny. We'll go, but first I'll have a word with Rogan."

"Go ahead," Ben suggested.

Macgregor swung to face him. "Rogan," he said sharply, "I told you the other day there was no place for you in this part of the country. I told you to get out."

"That's right," Ben nodded.

"I told you that," Macgregor continued, "and I meant it. If you're still here at dawn tomorrow, I'm coming after you. Fifty court orders will be no protection. I'll ride you out of this country if it's the last thing I do. And if Jinny Halstead backs you and get's hurt, that's her mistake."

Ben made no answer. There was no point in making any answer. He looked steadily at Macgregor, still puzzled at the violence of the man's feelings toward him.

"You'd better think it over, Jinny," the man added. "You'd better run him off or you might get hurt."

"Goodby, Mr. Macgregor," said Jinny Halstead.

Macgregor muttered something under his breath. He turned, moved down the steps, and plodded toward his horse. When he got there he took the reins from Breck Hollister and climbed into the saddle and without glancing again toward the porch, wheeled his horse and started away. Those who had come with him followed him quite closely.

Jinny stood on the edge of the porch until Macgregor and his men had disappeared over the crest of a low hill, then she turned to face Ben Rogan. A tight frown wrinkled her forehead. Her eyes were still cold and distant.

"Well, Rogan," she asked. "Was that what you wanted?"

"It's what was bound to happen," Ben answered.

"The fact that you're here gives Macgregor an excuse to raid the mesa."

"If I wasn't here, he would find another excuse. You know he would."

"What will you do tomorrow?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe I'll run. Tomorrow isn't here, yet."

Jinny Halstead was still frowning. She was silent for a moment, possibly considering what might happen tomorrow, possibly thinking it over as Macgregor had suggested. She finally nodded her head.

"I had no part in your coming here, Rogan," she said bluntly. "I have no interest in fighting Clara Bane's quarrel with Macgregor. Neither have my men. I want to keep this ranch. That's all. Tomorrow, if Macgregor comes after you, don't count on us for help. Maybe you'd better run. Maybe you'd better run tonight."

Ben Rogan chuckled. He shook his head. "I'm too tired to run tonight, Jinny. And I'm hungry. Do I rate supper?"

"It'll be ready in fifteen minutes," said Jinny Halstead.

She moved past him to the door and stepped into the house. She closed the door, almost slamming it.

JINNY HALSTEAD ordinarily took her meals with the men in the big, bare dining-room beyond the kitchen. Tonight, however, after putting the food on the table and ringing the supper bell, she filled a plate for herself in the kitchen and carried it to the small, family dining-room which had scarcely been used since her mother's death. There, she sat alone, thinking about tomorrow and what might happen and considering what she should do. She could have asked Gus Durango for advice, or Frank Van Dusen, who seemed always at her elbow, and she was tempted to consult one or both of them but something her father had drilled into her, long ago and over and over, stood in the way.

"Make your own decisions, Jinny." he had insisted. *"Go to yourself for advice. You will make mistakes, plenty of them, but in no other way will you ever grow up. Learn to depend on Jinny Halstead. You have to live with her all your life."*

She finished her meal, pushed her plate aside, and continued to sit at the table, leaning her forearms and elbows on it and staring at the faint pattern in the table cloth, and suddenly and for some reason she couldn't understand, trying to call up a picture of her mother. Her memories of her mother were like unreal dreams. In one of them, a laughing young woman stood somewhere below her, holding up her arms, and calling, *"Jump, Jinny. Jump. I'll catch you."* And she jumped and was caught tight in those arms and was held there, safe and secure. In another memory this same young woman held her hand and they walked along a pathway under the shade of giant trees where there were squirrels to feed, where birds were singing and there was later a picnic lunch on the grass. Sometimes Jinny felt she had hardly known her mother, and at other times she felt she had known her mother very well.

This was one of the times when she felt close to her. And that was strange. Strange because Jinny was sure her mother hadn't liked fighting, or violence of any sort. She had been a kind and gentle woman, according to her father, a woman who had never under any circumstances forgotten how to smile.

Footsteps sounded in the kitchen and then in the hallway. Jinny looked up and a moment later saw Gus Durango at the door, peering in at her, seemingly a little worried. His gray, wirey hair had gone unruly again. It was always unruly excepting at mealtime. Gus always came to the table with his hair neatly parted on the side and plastered down with water. And always by the time the meal was over, his hair looked mussed up.

"You all right, Jinny?" he demanded.

"Of course I'm all right," Jinny answered. She got to her feet. "Gus, will you saddle my horse?"

The old man frowned, but nodded.

"And tell Frank to saddle up," Jinny continued. "I'd like him to ride into Los Prados with me."

"That's a long ride for this time of night, Jinny."

"It's no farther to Los Prados than it ever was."

"You're sure you want to go in?"

"Yes, Gus."

"I could go with you, Jinny. I'd sort of like to go in to town, myself."

Jinny Halstead shook her head. "I'd rather you stayed here—just in case anything happened."

"Ben Rogan will be here."

"That's what I'm thinking of."

Gus ran his fingers through his hair, then tried unsuccessfully to smooth his hair into place. He shook his head, still looking worried. "Couldn't it go until tomorrow, Jinny?" he asked slowly. "What's

the sense in rushing off to Los Prados tonight."

Jinny smiled. She came around the table, walked up to where Gus was standing. She put a hand on his arm in an old gesture of close friendship. "Quit worrying about me, Gus," she insisted. "I've grown up. Remember? Besides, there will be a moon tonight. It will be an easy ride and I'll have Frank for company."

"It's still a long ride," Gus grumbled. But he offered no further objections. Turning away, he shuffled back toward the kitchen.

JINNY had only a few preparations to make for the trip to town. She fussed with her hair for a minute, then found a scarf to tie over it. She put on a jacket over the blue shirt and around her waist buckled the gun belt her father had given her, two years before. It was a regular gun belt and the gun in its holster was a late model Colt. She could handle it, too. Sam Halstead had insisted on that as part of her training around the ranch.

She had lighted the lamp in her room for it was growing dark. Now she turned it down, blew out the flame, and moved outside. Gus Durango and Frank Van Dusen were waiting in the yard with two saddled horses, and Frank, as was his custom, took off his hat as she joined them. There was a broad smile on his face.

"It's going to be a pleasant night for a ride, Jinny," he said to her. "The moon will be up in an hour or so."

"I'm sorry to have to ask you to ride in with me," said Jinny, "but I knew Gus wouldn't approve of me taking the trip alone."

"I don't like it, anyhow," growled Gus Durango.

"And I don't mind it at all," said Van Dusen. "It's been quite a spell since I've been to town."

He moved forward to help Jinny into the saddle and Jinny permitted this without particularly liking it. She wasn't used to being helped on her horse. As far back as she could remember, Gus and her father, and the various other riders they had had from time to time, had let her mount her horse, unassisted. Frank Van Dusen was the only man who had ever wanted to help her. Or to be brutally honest, Frank Van Dusen, aside from her father and Gus, was the only man who had ever been particularly attentive so far as she was concerned.

Part of that, she liked. She liked the way he always listened to her, his ever-present smile, his many courtesies. She liked the low sound of his laugh and the way he sometimes drawled what he was saying. He was attractive, too. She liked the way he looked but she didn't like the way he touched her or the feel of his hand on her arm. And that disturbed her, stood between them.

Frank Van Dusen had climbed his horse and was ready to ride. Jinny looked down at Gus. "I'll not be long in town," she promised. "We'll make it back well before morning."

"Sure," said Gus Durango. And then. "Why not stay over, Jinny? Beth Rogers could put you up."

Jinny shook her head. "We'll be back."

She glanced toward the bunkhouse. Ben Rogan was lounging against the wall between the open door and the window, his tall figure still clearly visible through the early shadows of the evening. Jinny had noticed him when she stepped from the house. She had half expected him to come forward and join them in the yard, but he hadn't.

Ben Rogan! A frown gathered on her face. She reached for the reins, lifted them.

"Let's ride," she said to Frank Van Dusen.

"That's what I've been waiting for," Van Dusen answered. "Here we go."

VI

BEN ROGAN WATCHED JINNY and Van Dusen ride out of the yard on their way to Los Prados. Gus Durango had told him where they were going but hadn't explained the reason for the late trip. It occurred to Ben that perhaps Gus didn't know the reason, that Jinny hadn't told him, that Jinny might have come to the point of turning to Van Dusen for advice, rather than Gus.

This brought a scowl to his face, reminding him once again how important it was to come to an understanding of Ollie Farnsworth's warning. There might, of course, be no basis at all for what Ollie had said but intuition told him there was. And this in spite of the way Van Dusen

had shown up at the door of the bunk house with his rifle when Macgregor had been here.

Gus came back across the yard to the bunk house. He gave Ben a sharp glance, then sank down on the step beside him.

"Did Jinny say why she was going to town?" Ben asked.

Gus shook his head.

"It's pretty late, isn't it?"

"Why?" asked Gus. "There's many a night I've headed for town, later than this."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "I heard Jed Crandall ride off while ago."

"He's gone back to the bluff. He and his brother are sort of keeping an eye on things. That's how we got a warning Macgregor was coming this afternoon."

Ben stared out through the gathering shadows of the night. To the south and east he saw Jinny and Frank Van Dusen top a low hill. For a moment their outlines were dimly visible against the greying sky. When he looked again, they were gone.

"Ben," said Gus Durango, "what's between you and this Clara Bane?"

"I've taken a job she's offered me. That's all."

"She's a good looking woman."

"Yeah."

"She's got money."

"So she has."

"She's not married."

Ben chuckled. He shook his head. "Sorry, Gus. But I'm not interested. This is a job and nothing more."

"It's a lot more than a job," said Gus Durango. "Macgregor never did like you. He hates Clara Bane. He said he would be after you tomorrow if you were still here and I reckon maybe he will. He'll gun you down, Ben, and you know it. And you say this is only a job."

"Maybe I should call it a tough job," Ben grinned.

He was silent for a moment and his grin disappeared. He owed Gus Durango, he decided, more of an explanation than he had given. Gus had always been friendly to him, and today had done all he could to persuade Jinny Halstead to recognize the court order, which was his excuse for being here.

"Gus," he said finally, "I'm getting more out of this job than wages. A lot more. That's why I took it. And I knew what I was getting into when I took it. I had a warning of what I would face. Macgregor saw me in Los Prados and warned me to get out of the country. That was before I had taken the job. After I saw Clara, three of Macgregor's men cornered me in the stable yard in front of Borghoff's. They took my gun, slammed me over the head with it, and shoved me at Chino. It was Chino who marked me up. After he had finished they again warned me to get out of the country."

Gus Durango grunted. He pulled his plug tobacco from his pocket, bit off a chunk, and looked up at Ben. "Do you know what I think?"

"No," said Ben.

"I think you're a fool."

"Maybe."

"And Clara Bane's a fool. I was wrong about her. I used to think she was a smart woman.

IT WAS growing darker and the evening wind had come up. It was sweeping down from the Mescaleros, to the north and east, stronger than the night before, strong and gusty. Ben rolled another cigaret. He said, "Gus, how long since there's been a fire on the mesa?"

"It's a dozen years since we've had a big one," Gus answered. "Lightning started it. If a rain hadn't come up the best timber on the mesa would have been lost."

"It doesn't sound reasonable that Macgregor would start a fire on the mesa, does it?"

"And burn up the timber he plans to saw? Never."

Ben stared thoughtfully into the darkness. He had been warned about a fire, a big fire, but he couldn't see it. He lit his cigaret, shook his head.

Gus got to his feet, stretching. "Time to turn in," he suggested. "You bunking here tonight, Ben."

"Tonight, at least," Ben answered.

"And what about tomorrow?"

"I don't know," said Ben. "I'll think about it."

"Macgregor won't be alone when he comes after you. He has fifteen men riding for him. Maybe more. He'll bring a crowd. We couldn't stand off a crowd, Ben."

"I don't expect it."

"Anytime Macgregor wants to," Gus continued, "he can take over the mesa. Jinny realizes that. All she's doing, now, is

bluffing. That's all any of us are doing. We've got our orders from Jinny not to fight. When things get tough, we'll run. We'll have to."

"And let Macgregor have the mesa?"

Gus chuckled. "Not exactly, Ben. I told you Jinny was stubborn. You should have guessed she was smart. Until Macgregor gets a title to the mesa he can't saw and market lumber. Jinny won't sell. She'll never sell. She'll move into town and fight him through the courts. There are still courts, Ben, and most of them are straight. There is still law, and most of it is honest. Macgregor thinks he can frighten Jinny, wear her down. No man was ever more wrong. I tell you, Macgregor was whipped before he started."

Those were brave words. They sounded fine. They might be true, but Ben wasn't as sure of it as Gus Durango. It took money to fight a thing through the courts, and Jinny had no money. It took time, and time was against her. There were probably taxes on the mesa, still unpaid. There were on most ranches. A tax sale could clear the title for Macgregor. If this didn't work there were many more legal tricks to which he could turn. Or as a final resort, an "accident" could happen to Jinny Halstead and Macgregor could deal with her heirs, who would probably be glad to get anything they could for the mesa. An "accident" to Jinny wasn't impossible.

"Don't stay out here too long," said Gus Durango, turning into the bunk house.

"I'll not," said Ben. "After I finish this cigaret I want to move my horse from the barn to the corral. Then I'll be in. I could use a little rest."

BEN dropped his cigaret, stepped on it, and then crossed to the barn. He pulled open the door and walked down to the stall where he had left his horse. This horse, King, a dark brown stallion, and the finest horse he had ever bred, was all he had left to show for four years of work. Ben rubbed King's nose affectionately. "Hi, boy," he murmured. "Want to move outside where you can breathe."

King pushed at him and Ben chuckled. He ran his hands over the stallion's wide, powerful shoulders and down his back. King could run. Really run. And had an almost endless endurance. King could make a chase of it if it came to that. And it probably would, but the chase would be only the beginning. It would give Macgregor an excuse to climb the mesa, but no more. He would have to turn on Jinny and he might do that through accusing her of helping the man he was after. And then what? How would he try to bring Jinny to her knees?

Ben stood there for a moment, trying to follow this line of thought to some satisfactory conclusion, trying to put himself in Macgregor's place in an effort to anticipate what the man might do. He heard a sound behind him, a sound at the door. He glanced over his shoulder. Against the grey outline of the door he saw a man's figure and it occurred to him, instantly, that Gus must have been wondering why he was so long, and must have come to see what was keeping him. But in the same moment he discarded that idea completely. The man in the open barn doorway wasn't Gus. Gus would have called his name. And Gus was short, and stooped.

The figure in the doorway was tall, slender.

The man stepped forward. Stepped forward and was immediately hidden in the barn's black shadows. Ben stood rigid, feeling the pull of his muscles as they tightened, aware of a sudden, driving excitement. It wasn't Gus who had entered the bar. And the Crandalls and Van Dusen were away. He had heard no one ride up.

This man had come stealthily, careful to make no sound. Even now careful to make no sound.

A match flared up, a match cupped in a man's hand and shielded from his face, a match held high to give the man a quick glance of the barn's interior. A low laugh reached Ben's ears. The man stepped forward, turning to his right, away from the stalls, away from Ben. And suddenly Ben knew the meaning of the warning he had received from Clara Bane, the warning of a fire, a big fire. The man had come to the hay racked in the end of the barn, dry loose hay which would catch fire instantly and become a blazing inferno in a matter of moments.

The man shook out the match he was holding. He struck another and tossed it into the hay. He reached for a third and struck it.

BEN MOVED SWIFTLY from the stall, clawing out his gun. He stepped forward. A flame was already leaping up the edges of the racked hay, throwing off a bright, yellow light. Against this light the man was clearly visible, a tall man, thin, a little stooped.

"Slap it out," Ben shouted. "Grab off your hat and slap it out."

The man stiffened. He jerked around to face Ben Rogan and he must have seen the gun in Ben's hand but he still raked at his holster, swinging up his gun.

Ben fired. He lunged forward, hearing the roar of the man's gun and firing again. He saw the man's body jerk under the impacts of the bullets, jerk and then crumple and the man's knees folded and he went down.

Still moving ahead, Ben jerked off his hat and beat at the flames. He screamed for Gus Durango. The smoke was sharp in his nostrils and brought tears to his eyes. He took a quick look at the figure on the barn floor but the man lying there hadn't moved since he had fallen. He was on his face, one arm crumpled under his stomach, the other extended and half circling his head and loosely holding his gun.

Gus Durango came pounding into the barn, water slopping from the two buckets which he carried. He half stumbled over the man's figure. Ben grabbed one of the buckets and pitched the water at the fire, smothering most of it. Gus got the rest, then went to the trough outside for more.

It was black again inside the barn when the fire was out. Black and the air was heavy with smoke and the wet, dead smell of the fire. Ben led his horse outside and turned him loose in the corral, then leaned there against the corral fence for a moment, breathing deeply, and aware of the weak feeling in his knees and the way his stomach was churning. He glanced toward the barn and saw Gus with a lantern and after a time, Gus joined him.

"What happened?" asked Gus.

"I was in the barn," said Ben slowly. "Maybe I had been there a minute or two, standing in King's stall, thinking about tomorrow. I heard a sound at the door and turned and saw a man come in, a man taller than you. I didn't know who it was or why he was there. He struck a match, started the fire and I jumped him. I shouted at him to slap out the fire but instead he pulled his gun. Is he dead?"

"As dead as a man can get, Ben."

"Who is he?"

"Jim Canby. He rode for Macgregor."

Ben moistened his lips. He didn't know Canby and he was suddenly glad he didn't. He would have no memories of the living Canby to torture him.

"I found this in his pocket," said Gus. He was holding a roll of bills. "Two hundred dollars. Maybe his price for starting the fire."

"Jinny can use it."

"That's what I had in mind."

BEN ROGAN mopped a hand over his face. He said, "Gus, I'm no good at this sort of thing. I don't think fast enough. I had a warning to watch out for a fire. A big fire. All I could think of was a fire in the timber and that didn't make sense. I should have guessed Macgregor would have tried to burn down the ranch. I should have guessed he would try it tonight, before moon-up."

"Why, Ben?"

"Everything read that way. First the warning of the fire. Next Jed Crandall's story that there were six men with Macgregor when he climbed the mesa and the fact that only five men were with him when he got here. You see, Canby dropped out and hid on the mesa. Macgregor knew the mesa was guarded. He had to get his man here, close to the house, for there wasn't much darkness before moon-up. There comes the moon now."

Gus glanced over his shoulder at the moon just lifting above the eastern horizon. "A man can't read everything," he muttered.

"But I should have seen this," said Ben. "It fits in every way. A forest fire would burn up the timber Macgregor wants. A ranch fire would help him. That fire in the barn, with a good start, would have spread to every building here. Tomorrow, Jinny would have no place to live, no place to quarter a crew, no money to rebuild. A costly fire would make her more ready to sell—or at least that's what Macgregor must have thought."

"Only there wasn't a fire."

"No."

"Ben, what do we do now?"

"Play it straight, Gus. Ride for the sheriff. Get him out here if you have to

rope him. Show him Canby and the burned hay in the barn. Tell him of the fire we just managed to put out."

"And what good will that do, Ben? Macgregor will lie out of it. He will say he had fired Canby. He will say Canby had a grudge against someone on the mesa and was trying to pay it off. He will prove it, if necessary, through the lying testimony of some of his men."

"Maybe."

"I'm right, Ben. You know it. Hal Wallace never was much of a sheriff. He's not going to buck Macgregor. He doesn't have the guts."

"But he won't try another fire if this story gets out. He won't dare try another fire in the face of the rumor that he was back of this one. Get the sheriff out here, Gus, and you'll save Jinny's ranch buildings for her. Get him out here as quickly as you can make it to town and back."

Gus considered this for a moment, then nodded his head. "I'll go saddle up."

GUS ignored the winding road, taking a direct route across the mesa and striking the road again near the edge of the bluff. Here, before dropping into the valley below, he had a brief conference with young Howard Crandall, who was standing the first night watch. He told Crandall of the attempt to fire the ranch house, and saw Crandall's eyes light with interest.

"Looks like things are going to start happening, doesn't it," Crandall grinned.

"It won't be fun for any of us," said Gus bluntly.

Down in the valley he let his horse run, turning over in his mind what he was going to say to the sheriff and with that settled, thinking for a moment of Howard Crandall, who could feel the excitement of this in a way which would never be possible to him. Crandall was hardly more than a boy. In this struggle for the mesa he was having his first taste of adventure, and he liked it, or thought he liked it. Once, Gus remembered, once long ago he had been like Howard Crandall. There had been Indian trouble—and there had been a girl.

The frown on his leathery face vanished as he remembered her. Beth Marlowe. Beth Marlowe, whose hair had been like a morning sunrise and whose laughter was the sweetest sound in the world. A chuckle broke from his throat. He wondered what the people around here would think if they knew that sour-faced, grumpy old Gus Durango had for three years been married to a girl more beautiful than any in this part of the country. She had died, suddenly, and her death had left him bitter and hard. It had taken the long years to rub off the edges of his bitterness, and some of it still remained.

Gus had half expected to overtake Jinny and Van Dusen, but they had either turned aside from the road or had wasted no time at all, for he pulled into Los Prados without sight of them, rode up Front street to the Plaza, and in the trough, there, watered his horse. It was late. There was no one in the Plaza, no one on the streets. Lights showed in most of the saloons and here and there, at the tie rails, were a few saddled horses. The sheriff's office was dark.

As Gus Durango made this brief inspection of the town, the door to the Truitt house opened and two men stepped out, two of Macgregor's men, Matt Billings and Breck Hollister. Gus eyed the two men narrowly, wondering what might happen if they glanced toward the Plaza and recognized him. He touched the gun in his holster, making sure it was loose.

Billings and Hollister turned up the street without a glance in his direction. At the corner of the saloon, they stopped, both turning toward the passageway between the saloon and the next building. Gus had the distinct impression that they were talking to someone, someone who had been hidden there in the thick shadows, waiting for them. This gripped and held his interest.

After a time the two men moved on to where their horses were tied. They mounted them and rode out of town. Gus Durango waited, his eyes on the narrow passage between the Truitt house and the building next to it. A minute passed, another, and then a man stepped into view. A thin man, stoop shouldered, not very tall. A man in a black suit, and wearing a Derby hat. Ollie Farnsworth.

The bank clerk looked quickly up and down the street, then crossed the board walk and angled toward the upper corner of the Plaza. Gus watched the man out of sight, feeling a little uneasy over what

he had witnessed, and wondering what Ollie had had to say to Billings and Hollister, and why the brief meeting had been so secret.

But this wasn't why he had come here. Gus put the matter out of his mind. The sheriff's office was closed. That meant he had to dig the sheriff out of one of the saloons or from his home. It was time he got started.

VII

ABOUT HALF WAY DOWN THE valley toward Los Prados, Jinny and Van Dusen had stopped to blow their horses. They had made good time, traveled fast, there had been little opportunity until now for conversation. Jinny sat easily, naturally in the saddle during this rest period, her body sagging a little, relaxed. She watched Frank Van Dusen build a smoke and wondered, briefly, at the satisfaction men seemed to get from tobacco, either through cigaret, pipe, or by the method Gus Durango used, chewing it. There should be, she decided, something comparable for women.

"Why are we going to Los Prados?" Van Dusen asked.

"There's someone there I want to see," said Jinny slowly, "ask a question."

"Clara Bane?"

Jinny nodded, wondering how Van Dusen had guessed, then feeling it was an easy guess since the arrival on the mesa of Ben Rogan.

"I've heard a lot about Clara Bane since I've been here," said Van Dusen reflectively.

"Is that what men call her? Clara?" asked Jinny.

"That," said Van Dusen, grinning. "And other things."

"Such as what?"

"Such as The Red-head, Widow Bane, Mrs. Money-bags."

"And The Chippy?"

"Yes, I've heard that, too. And a few more not very polite."

"She's an attractive woman," said Jinny, frowning.

Van Dusen shook his head. "Not to me."

"She's clever."

"I don't like clever women," said Van Dusen. He rode closer. "Jinny, why do you want to see her? Is it about this fellow Rogan?"

"Part of it," Jinny admitted.

Van Dusen scowled. He said, "Look here, Jinny. If you want Rogan kicked off the mesa you don't have to go to Clara Bane. Just tell me. I'll handle it."

Jinny was silent, making no comment to this but aware of an inward appreciation which was warming. This was one of the things which attracted her to Frank Van Dusen. His ability to measure her need and stand ready to meet it. His strength which was held in constant deference to what she wished. He wasn't blunt with her, as Gus somethimes was. He could treat her as an equal yet remember she was still a woman. He reached out now and put his hand on hers.

"You don't have to put up with him, Jinny, if you don't want to."

Jinny didn't pull away for a moment but she had stiffened a little at Van Dusen's touch. She couldn't help it. A frown gathered on her face. She took a deep breath and thought, *"What's the matter with me? Is it just that he's a man? Am I afraid of men? Is that it? What would I do if he tried to kiss me? Or if any man tried to kiss me?"*

Color flooded her face. She felt the pressure of Van Dusen's hand grow tighter and then suddenly she pulled away and forced a laugh, a high, unnatural laugh. "We'd better ride on," she heard herself saying. "It's still a long ways to town."

IT WAS LATE when they reached Los Prados and reined up at the Plaza. The square, excepting for a few saddled horses, was deserted.

"What do we do?" asked Van Dusen. "Go to Clara's home and pull her out of bed?"

"That's what I do," said Jinny. "Where will I find you when I'm ready to start home."

"Why can't I go along?" Van Dusen asked.

"I don't want Clara Bane to think I need help."

"I can at least ride you there."

Jinny shrugged. "If you wish. And then?"

"I'll be at the Truitt house, I suppose."

They turned down the street toward the river. No lights showed at the windows of Clara's home but Jinny dismounted and

tied her horse to the hitching post near the gate.

"I shouldn't be long," she said to Van Dusen, "but don't wait out here. Have your drink at Will Truitt's. You've earned it and more."

"I'll have one," said Van Dusen, "but I don't need it."

Jinny opened the gate and walked up the path to the house. She climbed the steps to the porch, knocked on the door, waited for a moment and then knocked again. She knocked a third time and shortly after this heard Clara's voice on the other side of the door asking who was there.

"Jinny Halstead," said Jinny.

The door was opened almost immediately. "Come in," said Clara's voice from the darkness of the room. "I'll find and light the lamp. If you hear me swearing it's because I've run into something. I usually do."

Jinny stepped into the room and closed the door. She waited there until Clara found and lit the lamp in one of the wall brackets and then turned to face her. Clara was wearing a dark blue quilted robe. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders. It was a tawny, deep red, and seemed to catch fire in the glow of the lamp. The robe was wide and deeply open at the throat. Jinny felt a twinge of envy. If Frank Van Dusen could see Clara like this he would know she was beautiful.

"It's late," said Jinny. "I know that, and I'm sorry, but I have to be back to the mesa by morning."

Clara shrugged her shoulders. "I don't mind. I had just gone to bed. I wasn't asleep. What is it, Jinny?"

"Why did you send Rogan to the mesa?" asked Jinny.

"He had a letter," said Clara. "Didn't he show it to you."

"Yes, I saw the letter."

"Then what more can I tell you?"

Jinny's lips tightened. "You can tell me why you sent Rogan to the mesa."

Clara sat down in one of the chairs. There was a quizzical look in her eyes, almost an amused look. "You don't believe what you read in the letter?"

"I want to know more than the letter told me," said Jinny.

She came deeper into the room. She took a chair across from Clara. She leaned back in it, folding her hands in her lap.

"I don't know what I can add to what was in the letter," said Clara lightly. "I can't afford to lose three thousand dollars. If there is trouble on the mesa, I might. Ben Rogan is there to see that the bank's interest in the ear-marked cattle is protected."

"And if there is trouble do you think Rogan will be any protection?"

"Won't he?"

"No. And you know it."

"Your opinion of Ben Rogan doesn't seem to be very high."

"My opinion of Rogan," said Jinny, "isn't important. What could any single man do against Macgregor's crowd?"

"Perhaps we'll find out."

JINNY shook her head. She was silent for a moment, staring straight at this woman about whom she had heard so much, yet knew so little, whose background was so different from hers that it barred measurement, who had been a dance hall girl, prostitute, banker's wife, and who now, within her hands, held more power in all probability than any other individual in the county. Power she had inherited from her husband and had enhanced through her own ability. What was she really like, underneath? Was she still the dance hall girl? The prostitute? Or did she have the strengths some men seemed to think?

"Do you still want to buy the mesa?" Jinny asked abruptly.

"If you want to sell it," said Clara.

"I don't."

"Then I don't want to buy it."

"Suppose I sell to Macgregor?"

Clara smiled. "You won't, Jinny."

"No," said Jinny slowly. "I won't. And I'll not fight Macgregor the way you expect me to fight him, either. I'll not have men killed, Clara. I'll bluff Macgregor as long as I can. When I can bluff him no longer, we'll move to town. Gus and I and Frank Van Dusen and Jed and Howard Crandall. That will leave Rogan to defend the mesa alone, if he's that big a fool. And what do you think will happen then?"

Clara came to her feet. "You don't mean that."

"But I do."

"If you leave the mesa to Macgregor you'll never get it back."

"He'll never keep it, Clara, without a title."

"You don't known Macgregor."

"I know the law."

"The law," snapped Clara, and her voice was brittle. "Do you think Hal Wallace could throw Macgregor off the mesa?"

"He's the sheriff. He'll have to. The mesa belongs to me."

"It will belong to you with all your cattle gone," said Clara sharply. "With your fences destroyed, your buildings burned, and with taxes to pay, taxes you can't meet."

"Then Macgregor will pay damages."

"Never. Never in the world. Jinny, you're out of your mind. You're not thinking clearly."

Jinny sat quietly in her chair, watching Clara Bane, sensing the tension which gripped the older woman and trying to understand it. Clara Bane, she realized, had expected her to fight Macgregor on the mesa, fight him with guns and men. The announcement that she wouldn't had upset her. But why? What was Clara Bane's stake in such a fight? Why did she want it?

"You hate Macgregor, don't you," said Jinny Halstead.

"I hate all men."

"All men?" asked Jinny.

CLARA drew a deep breath. She lifted her hands to her hair, brushing it back from her forehead and when she spoke again her voice wasn't so harsh. "All men? Of course not. But Macgregor, yes."

"Why, Clara?"

The woman shook her head. "Put it this way if you want to, Jinny. I'm looking ahead. Macgregor's a big man in the county. If he takes over the mesa and the timber on it he'll be even bigger, too big to fight. I want to stop him."

"But that's not all," said Jinny shrewdly.

"No, that's not all."

Jinny got to her feet. She crossed to the table near the curtained front window and stood there for a moment, a slender, almost boyish figure in boots, jeans, blue shirt and jacket, and with a scarf tied over her hair, vaguely puzzled about the relationship between Clara Bane and Arne Macgregor, and the impending struggle, but seeing quite clearly what it meant to her, and not liking what she saw.

"You didn't mean it," said Clara, "about leaving the mesa. You couldn't mean it."

"Of course I meant it," said Jinny, and she sounded tired.

"I can't believe you'd be so foolish."

Jinny turned around. She said, "Clara, you sent Rogan to the mesa to bring things to a head, to force a fight. Your fight. You expected us to line up with Rogan, and when the time came you probably meant to throw more men into the struggle. Your men. That was it. That was your plan, but I'll have no part of it. Macgregor came to see me this afternoon. He saw Rogan, too. He gave Rogan until dawn to get out of the country. He's coming after him then, and so far as we are concerned, Rogan is on his own. We won't back him, Clara. Back him in your fight."

"He would be fighting for you, too."

"But not the way I want to fight. We won't lift a finger to help him. I just thought you'd like to know. By tomorrow night, probably, you'll need a new custodian for that ear-marked herd."

"You're a fool, Jinny."

"Maybe," said Jinny. "Maybe I am."

She turned to the door, opened it, and then looked back at Clara Bane. She said, "Sleep well, Clara—if you can."

CLARA BANE watched Jinny step outside and watched the door close and afterwards walked to it and locked it and then took a brief turn around the room, stopping finally near the table where Jinny had stood.

"The little fool," she said under her breath. "The damned little fool. Doesn't she realize that once Macgregor gets a foothold on the mesa he'll never give it up?"

There was no one to make any answer, but the answer had already been given by Jinny Halstead. Clara bit her lips. She was more upset by Jinny's visit than she wanted to admit and she was a little surprised at how clearly Jinny had seen through her plans. This wasn't working out at all as she had thought it would. It had never once occurred to her that Jinny's crew wouldn't stand with Rogan. That was where things broke down. She had expected Jinny to make a fight for the mesa.

Jinny had indicated she would. Jinny had said she would never sell, that she would hold what was hers. Rogan should have been able to count on the support of the men who rode for her.

And what now? What would happen in the morning when Macgregor climbed the mesa with his usual crowd?

Clara hurried to her bedroom. She threw off the robe she had been wearing, and the nightgown under it. She dressed, putting on the plain, conservative clothes which she had worn since taking over active management of the bank, and which she hated. She twisted her hair into a bun and pinned it into place and reached for a coat and the black, sailor brimmed straw hat, another thing she hated, but which people couldn't talk about.

Leaving the house she walked up the street to the Plaza. She had just reached it when she saw Jinny and Frank Van Dusen mounting their horses near the Great Northern hotel. She had recently heard something about Van Dusen and she tried to recall what it was, but it wouldn't come to her. She thought it was something Belle Waverley had mentioned.

After Jinny and Van Dusen had turned down Front street, Clara continued across the Plaza to the Truitt House. She pushed open the doors and stepped inside. She had never before been in the Truitt House, or in any other saloon in Los Prados. The fact that she had come here tonight was something which would be discussed and wondered about tomorrow. She knew that, but gave it little thought.

Inside the doors, she stopped, her eyes circling the room. It was almost empty. The man for whom she was looking, wasn't here.

Will Truitt hurried toward her, making no attempt to mask his astonishment. "Anything I can do for you, Mrs. Bane?" he asked.

Clara smiled and shook her head. She rather liked Will Truitt. He was an unspectacular man, perhaps unattractive, but there was a steadiness about him which she could appreciate. She said, "Nothing, thank you," and turned and left the room.

From the Truitt House she recrossed the Plaza to Belle Waverley's, and there, knocked on Belle's door. She knocked insistantly and after a time heard Belle's sleepy voice telling her the place was closed, and to go away.

"Open up, Belle," said Clara. "It's me."

Belle Waverley unlocked and opened the door and looked out at her. "Clara!" she gasped. "For God's sake! What's happened?"

"Is Pete Sidewell here?" asked Clara.

Belle shook her head. "He was here earlier but no man stays here through the night. You know that."

"Where can I find him?"

"I don't know. Honest."

"Ask your girls."

"They're asleep."

"Ask them," said Clara sharply.

Clara trudged away. She was gone for a long time. When she returned she said, "Apache Crossing. He left two hours ago. He said he would be back tomorrow night."

"I can't wait that long," said Clara impatiently.

She walked back to the street and stood there for a moment, deep in thought. Apache Crossing was a good six hours' ride, north and west of Los Prados. It was a stage station in the fringe of the Mescalero hills on the road to Lincoln. And now something more. A hangout for men who rode the back trails, for men with a price on their heads.

But she couldn't wait until tomorrow night. Jinny's decision not to back Ben Rogan threatened everything she had planned. She turned abruptly down one of the streets leading from the Plaza and in front of a dark, frame house, stopped. After a momentary hesitation, she approached the house and knocked on the door. Again, she had to knock several times but finally she heard Ollie Farnsworth's voice asking who was there.

"Clara Bane," she answered. "Get dressed. Find a horse you can ride and come over to my house at once. I have a message which must be delivered before morning."

"Right away, Clara," said Ollie.

Smiling, Clara started home. Ollie, she was quite sure, was in love with her. His wife probably guessed and probably made his life miserable, but Ollie seemed able to stand it. He would do anything she asked, and without question. He was a fool, of course, but at times like this. a rather comforting fool.

VIII

AFTER GUS DURANGO LEFT for Los Prados, Ben Rogan pulled a mattress from the bunk house, got several blankets, and near the bunk house door made up his bed. He didn't like the thought of sleeping inside, of being penned up. This, he knew, was an indication of the tension he was beginning to feel, and which would be driving him in the days to come. It wasn't a healthy sign and he would have liked to have thrown it off but didn't know how. Tonight, one of Macgregor's men had tried to set fire to the Halstead barn, and was dead. Tomorrow, as Macgregor had promised, he would climb the mesa. And tomorrow night, Ben realized, if he slept at all, it would be under the stars and far from here.

He wasn't at all sure he could sleep tonight but he dozed off almost at once and the first, faint light of morning was in the eastern sky when the drumming sound of hoof beats awoke him. He sat up, threw off his blanket and scrambled to his feet, aware of the stiffness in his muscles but ignoring it. He could see two mounted men approaching the ranch and as he checked his gun he identified one, from his size, as Gus Durango. The other man, a bulkier figure, was probably the sheriff, Hal Wallace.

Ben moved forward to meet them as they rode into the yard. He took the reins of their horses, nodded to Gus and then to Wallace.

"'Lo, Ben," said the sheriff.

He swung awkwardly to the ground. He was a big man, big bellied, tall even though his body sagged. He wore a bushy mustache and the loose skin of his face was deeply wrinkled. He always seemed to be scowling.

"I don't see why I had to come out here tonight," he grumbled. "Tomorrow would have done just as well."

Gus had now dismounted and Ben led the two horses to the corral fence and tied them there. Gus trailed after him.

"Didn't he want to come?" Ben asked.

"It took a little argument."

"What have you told him?"

"Everything I could think of?"

"About Macgregor?"

"Yep. He says we're wrong about Macgregor."

"Did you tell him why I was here?"

"I told him about the court order. It seemed to stump him a little. I reckon maybe he couldn't figure it out."

"What did he say about Jim Canby?"

"He couldn't figure that, either, but he says he's sure Canby wasn't acting on Macgregor's orders."

Ben glanced toward the sheriff. Hal Wallace had been standing in the yard, just where he had dismounted, but now as Ben and Gus Durango continued their conversation, he started toward them.

"We'll keep him here, Gus," said Ben quickly.

"We'll what?" Gus asked.

"We'll keep him here," Ben said again. "I'll explain why, later. Just don't let him ride away."

Hal Wallace joined them, looking sharply from Ben to Gus Durango, then back at Ben. He pulled off his hat and smoothed a hand over the bald top of his head.

"Any coffee around here?" he suggested.

"We can cook up some," said Gus. He glanced at Ben. "Did Jinny and Van Dusen get back?"

"Not yet," Ben answered.

A worried expression came into Gus Durango's face. He turned and stared out through the thinning night shadows in the direction of Los Prados, then shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe they didn't hurry. We'll get the coffee started."

They went into the ranch house kitchen where Gus laid and started a fire in the cook stove and put on water to boil. And while they waited for the coffee they sat at the table in the big dining room, Hal Wallace sagging wearily in his chair and refusing the tobacco which Ben offered him.

"What happened out here last night?" asked the sheriff abruptly.

Ben told him of the fight in the barn and the fire which he and Gus had put out, and when he finished, Hal Wallace shook his head.

"I don't understand it," he muttered. "It doesn't make sense."

"Why doesn't it?" Ben asked.

"Macgregor wouldn't try anything like that."

"He wants the mesa."

"He wants to buy it."

"And Jinny Halstead won't sell. He's trying to force her hand."

"I still don't believe it."

"He's ordered me out of the country."

Hal Wallace shrugged his shoulders. "That's probably something personal, Ben. Macgregor never did like you. When I see him I'll talk to him."

"Thanks," said Ben, dryly.

He heard the sound of horses in the yard and saw Gus get up and hurry to the door. "It's Jinny and Van Dusen," said Gus. "I'll take their horses and tell them what's happened. Watch the coffee for me, Ben."

WHEN JINNY, Van Dusen and Gus Durango entered the ranch house, Ben and the sheriff were having their coffee. Both came to their feet, Hal Wallace nodding and saying, "'Lo, Jinny. How are you?"

Jinny's lips were tight. Anger trembled in her voice. "I'm not responsible for what happened here last night, sheriff."

"Of course not," said Hal Wallace.

Jinny glanced at Ben Rogan. She said, "Rogan, I want to talk to you."

"Sure," said Ben.

He left the table, moving past Van Dusen whose face wore a tight scowl and Gus Durango whose expression told him nothing. Jinny led him to the kitchen and across it and down a corridor to the front room. There, she lit the lamp on the table and then straightened up to face him, still showing her anger in the stiffness of her body.

"So you think you've got what you wanted," she said slowly. "You think now we'll have to stand behind you?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders, shook his head. "I didn't plan what happened last night, Jinny. I didn't send Canby here or know he was coming."

"You shot him."

"Yes, I shot him."

"Did you have to?"

"Yes"

"I don't believe it," said Jinny. "I'll never believe it. I think it's what you wanted and that you took advantage of it. I saw Clara Bane last night."

"Did you?"

"She told me she sent you here to fight Macgregor. Do you deny it?"

"No."

"Then get this straight, Rogan. If Clara Bane has hired you to fight Macgregor, I have no objections. But you can't make your fight on the mesa. This is my ranch. I'll defend it in my way, and without your help. I should have stood by my decision yesterday, that you leave. I've made the same decision this morning. This time I will not change my mind."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. There was no point in arguing with this girl, he knew. She had planned her course of action and would hold to it, if she could. She would bluff Macgregor and talk back to him up to the point of actual conflict, and then she would pull out and count on the support of men like Hal Wallace, and the courts, not appreciating the delays of such a course, or the cost in time and money.

"You are leaving the mesa at once, Rogan," said Jinny Halstead.

Ben grinned at her. "Could I have a quick breakfast before I ride?"

"Yes," said Jinny, and she seemed to see nothing humorous in his request. "Yes, if it's quick, and if you fix it yourself."

BEN FIXED his breakfast in the kitchen while Jinny and the others went out to the barn. It was growing light. In another hour the sun would be up.

Gus came in just as he was finishing and stood in the doorway, watching him, frowning, and seeming uneasy.

"Have a chair, Gus," Ben suggested. "Have some coffee."

Gus shook his head. "Jinny," he announced, "asked Van Dusen to catch and saddle your horse."

"I'm being chased off the mesa again," Ben answered. "This time Jinny means it."

"Are you going?"

"At least as far as the bluff. There, I'll probably run into Macgregor and have to turn back."

"Here?"

"No Gus. I think I'll give him a run. But Macgregor, himself, won't chase me very far. He'll be anxious to know what happened to Jim Canby. He and some of his men will come this way. That's why I want you to keep the sheriff here, even if you have to hold a gun on him to make him stay."

"You figure Macgregor won't cause us much trouble if Hal Wallace is here."

"It's a good bet, Gus. Macgregor doesn't want to make his fight against Jinny in the open."

Gus Durango rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin, a worried look showing in his eyes. He said, "Ben, what's going to happen? You can't whip Macgregor by running away from him. If you run straight you'll be gone. If you run in circles, his men will trap you. What's the plan? What's ahead for any of us?"

"I don't know," said Ben, shrugging his shoulders. "Did you drop the word in town that Macgregor had tried to burn Jinny out?"

"Several places. The story will get around. Of course Macgregor will deny it."

"Sure he will deny it," Ben agreed. "But he won't try another fire here at the ranch. Last night's fire could have been called an accident. If there is another, people will wonder about it. Even Macgregor can't risk being too crude. When he gets here today and runs into the sheriff, he'll pull in his horns and act neighborly. See if I'm not right."

"Ben?"

"What?"

"How about me riding with you?"

Ben Rogan grinned. He finished his coffee and stood up, shaking his head but feeling the warmth of Gus Durango's suggestion. "Not yet, Gus," he answered. "Stick with Jinny. Maybe she won't be able to duck a fight. Maybe she'll need you. But there is one thing you can do for me."

"What?"

"Sometime this evening, stake out a horse and a sack of food near the old line shack, north and east of here."

"Anyplace else, Ben?"

"No, and I'd better get going. Macgregor might head for the mesa pretty early."

THEY WENT OUTSIDE. Ben's horse had been saddled and was tied to the corral fence. Jinny, Van Dusen and the sheriff stood near it. Jinny was talking. The sheriff was shaking his head. Van Dusen made some comment, apparently in support of Jinny, but Hal Wallace didn't seem impressed. He continued to shake his head.

"You're both wrong," Ben heard Wallace saying as he and Gus drew near. "Macgregor's a fine man. He only offered to buy the mesa to help Jinny. It will be years before it will pay to cut the timber up here."

"It would pay now," said Jinny bluntly.

"That's right," said Ben.

He checked the cinch strap holding his saddle, then loosened the reins from the corral fence, and mounted. He looked down at the sheriff. "Anything you want to ask me about the trouble here last night?" he demanded.

"Not right now," said Hal Wallace. "Where are you going?"

Ben glanced at Jinny. Standing between Van Dusen and Wallace she seemed awfully small. Small and somehow helpless and he felt suddenly sorry for her and wished he could help her, or at least talk this through with her on an unemotional basis. But he couldn't. She wouldn't talk to him as she talked to Gus or Van Dusen, or even to Wallace.

"Where are you going?" asked Wallace again.

"Just for a ride," said Ben Rogan.

"Will you be in town today?"

Ben was still looking at Jinny. He shrugged his shoulders. "I might be."

"Drop in and see me, Ben."

"Sure," said Ben. "if I can make it."

Jinny's face had tightened. Her eyes blazed with anger. "Rogan is leaving the mesa," she said to Wallace. "He is leaving because I have ordered him to leave. He came here only to force trouble between us and Macgregor. I'll not have it."

"You had it before I came," said Ben mildly.

He glanced at Van Dusen, whose dark face was scowling, at Wallace who looked worried, uncomfortable and tired, and at Gus Durango who nodded his encouragement. Then lifting the reins of his horse he said, "Let's travel, King," and rode from the yard.

THE SUN was more than an hour high when Ben Rogan noticed the tell-tale cloud of dust moving across the valley from the direction of the MAC ranch. From behind a screen of grease-

wood on the edge of the bluff overlooking the break where the mesa road dropped into the valley, Ben maintained his watch. Soon, just ahead of the lifting dust, he could make out a group of riders. Quite a large group. Macgregor, apparently, was bringing most of his crew with him.

Ben sat up, rolled a cigaret, and lit it, thinking wryly that this might be his last peaceful smoke for some time. Jed and Howard Crandall had been here when he arrived. He had sent them to the ranch, saying Gus wanted them, and that for a time he would take their place. Howard, perhaps guessing what he had in mind, had wanted to stay. "A man could hold this road for a long time," he had boasted.

This looked possible, but wasn't true. There were other trails by which a mounted man could climb to the mesa. Anyone trying to hold this road would soon be out-flanked.

Ben sucked on his cigaret, now and then glancing through the greasewood screen toward the approaching riders. He wasn't as excited as he had thought he would be, and that was strange for this was a new experience to him. He had lived on a ranch most of his life. He had been involved, probably, in the usual number of fights, but never anything like this, never anything where bullets were used and where lives were at stake, never anything where the odds against him were quite so great, or the issues so confused.

Some things were clear. Macgregor wanted the mesa and would stop at nothing to get it. Jinny Halstead wouldn't sell, but neither would she fight Macgregor here on the mesa. The fight, if there was to be any, was Clara Bane's, and right now it looked hopeless.

Ben scowled. He picked up the rifle lying across his knees, levered a cartridge into the firing chamber, and glanced again through the greasewood toward the approaching riders. He could see them now quite distinctly, could count them. There were fifteen men with Arne Macgregor. Sixteen in all. Some he could identify as they forded the Rio Penasco. Macgregor, Matt Billings, Chino, Hollister, Eddie Webb. He stretched out on his stomach and poked his rifle forward, waited until the men were at the foot of the road which climbed to the mesa, then sent a warning shot streaking above their heads.

They scattered.

They scattered fast, some streaking away, bending low over their horses, and others wheeling in close to the bluff where he couldn't see them. In a matter of minutes some of these men he couldn't see would be heading for other trails which climbed to the mesa, but Ben had counted on that. He took a snap shot at a man who wasn't completely hidden, then called, "Macgregor! Macgregor! Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you, Rogan," came Macgregor's heavy voice. "I can hear you but I won't be hearing you long."

"Keep off the mesa, Macgregor," Ben warned. "There's no place for you here."

Those were just empty words and Ben knew it. His only reason for saying anything had been to identify himself and to let Macgregor know that he had fired the shots rather than one of Jinny's men. He owed that much to Jinny. To Jinny, who wanted to fight without fighting, who wanted to hold the mesa but not at the price she might have to pay.

Backing away from the edge of the bluff he hurried to where he had tied his horse, swung into the saddle, and rode north.

On one crest of one of the rolling hills, not far from the bluff, and in a wide, open space, he reined up and waited.

After a few minutes, two riders topped the bluff to the left. They saw him, but waited. Three more showed up to Ben's right, then others appeared on the mesa who had come up the road, finding it unguarded. They also saw him almost at once and came racing toward him.

"Here we go, King," said Ben Rogan. "It's time to run."

He was a little tense, now. A little excited. But not frightened. Not yet. A rifle shot streaked high above him and then another but King was really moving and they were soon out of range. Ben slowed down, then, and looked back. Macgregor's crowd had stopped and had gathered in some kind of conference. Ben reined up and waited, stroking King on the neck and breathing deeply. After a time the conference broke up. Three men split off to the right, three to the left. The others moved directly ahead, running their horses.

"Time to go again, King," said Ben Rogan.

He let King run once more, now and then glancing over his shoulder, and soon Macgregor's plan was apparent. The men who had split off to the left and the right were now swinging in approximately the direction he was going. Ahead was a rough part of the mesa, a place of wooded hills and deep gulleys. If he turned left or right when he got there he wouldn't only have to worry about the men behind him, but also about the flankers. Someplace he might run into them. Or someplace they would be sure to cut his trail and a gun signal would summon the others.

Ben's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. King could run. He could probably out run any horse Macgregor had, but a straight course wasn't possible if he was to stay on the mesa. And whenever he turned, either to the right or left, he would be using up the distance advantage he had gained. This was something to be considered, something Ben hadn't figured on. For the first time it occurred to him that perhaps this ride wasn't going to be easy.

IX

BEN KEPT TO AS STAIGHT A course as possible as he first moved into the hills, stopping several times at a high point to look back and mark the course of those who followed, and to give them a glimpse of him. He had a good lead, perhaps a mile, and when well into the hills he increased it, driving King hard for a time and then turning abruptly west for a short distance and after this, south, heading now back toward the open mesa and keeping as much as possible in the shelter of the hills.

He was pretty sure as he rode back toward the more open country that he was between Macgregor's main body and those who had split off to the right. But he couldn't be sure and he rode with one hand on his gun, constantly scanning the area to both sides and ahead of him, and behind. When he figured he had passed Macgregor's men he rode faster and after a time reined up in the protection of a clump of scrub pine on the crest of a hill. Quite deliberately, then, he drew his gun and fired three signal shots into the air.

After reloading he dismounted to stretch his legs and to have a smoke, constantly watching the hills through which he had just come for some sight of the men who were after him. They would have heard those shots, he knew, and though three shots might not have been Macgregor's signal, some of the men would turn back to investigate, or following his trail, the main body would soon show up.

They did. Ben caught a clear glimpse of the riders topping a distant hill. They dropped out of sight and moments later, reappeared briefly on another high point of land. Ben led his horse to the far side of the scrub pine crowning this hill, tied him there securely, drew his rifle from its boot and walked back. Lying flat on the ground, he waited. The men came into sight once more, right on the course he had taken, apparently following the tracks of his horse.

Ben levered his rifle and when the approaching riders were within its range, squinted along the barrel and squeezed his trigger. Some man's horse reared high in the air, unseating his rider. The others broke apart. Ben could hear their faint shouts and knew they were looking from side to side, frantically, wondering where he was. He levered his rifle again, took one more shot and again saw a man's horse plunge forward and go down, spilling the man from the saddle.

An answering rifle shot screamed through the air, high and a little to the right of where he was lying. One of Macgregor's men had spotted him. Ben came quickly to his feet and raced to where King was tied. Another shot cut through the grove and then two more, close together. Untieing his horse, Ben scrambled into the saddle and drove King down the hill, swinging a little to the west but keeping in the near open country.

He looked back. The chase was on again and Macgregor's riders were coming hard. But there weren't so many of them. Two had had to double up thus taking four men out of the crowd. Where there had been ten in the main group there were now only six.

The sun climbed high in the sky, passed its zenith, and started down toward the distant Sacramentos. Ben Rogan pulled in at the far west well on the mesa to water

his horse, refill his canteen, and drink, himself, of the warm, brackish water. He stared back. Macgregor's men were still following him. Once more he had broken into the hills and out again and now was nearing the south west corner of the open mesa.

Macgregor's men were together again. Those he had first sent out as flankers had caught up with the main body. Only the four men riding double, trailed, and not far.

Ben rode on, still not cutting in toward the hills. At the well, Macgregor's men stopped to water their horses and Ben reined in and waited. The day, thus far, hadn't been too hard. He had been lucky, and he had King. And in King lay the difference.

Still looking back Ben saw three men slant off to the south and east, and three more to the south and west, toward the hills. Macgregor was again putting out flankers to push him into the hills and cut him off. Four riders moved straight after him.

Ben rode on, scowling, and constantly looking over his shoulder. Six men were still at the well, the four riding double and two others. And now these left, turning back across the mesa in the direction of the Halstead ranch.

The scowl on Ben's face grew deeper. One of the six heading for the ranch would undoubtedly be Macgregor but what was puzzling was why Macgregor had delayed so long in this side trip. Ben had expected him to head for the ranch much earlier. He had counted on Hal Wallace being at the ranch when Macgregor got there. On one excuse or another, Gus Durango could have held the sheriff at the ranch until mid-morning, or perhaps even later. But whether or not Gus had been able to keep Wallace there this long, Ben didn't know.

The men behind him were coming hard and those who had cut off to the south and east were beginning a long, slow circle. It was time to ride. Ben considered the terrain ahead and the thin forrested hills to his right. He didn't know this part of the mesa too well, but neither, in all probability, did the men riding for Macgregor.

He shook out King's reins and swung a little to the right toward the hills. Behind him he heard the crack of a rifle but it was a wasted shot for Macgregor's men still weren't in range.

JINNY HALSTEAD was in her room, packing the few things she might need in town, when she heard the men ride into the yard. She wasn't leaving the mesa. Not yet. But she would have to leave. She could see that quite distinctly. She couldn't bluff Macgregor much longer. She couldn't bluff him while he had an excuse to stay on the mesa, while he was chasing Rogan.

A little while earlier, after the sheriff had left for Los Prados, taking Canby's body with him, she had had a blunt talk with Gus Durango. And it hadn't been a friendly talk. This bothered her, for she had always been able to depend on Gus. Now, she didn't know that she could, or that she could much longer. She had accused him of siding with Rogan, and he had almost admitted it. He stubbornly refused to see that this fight of Rogan's, wasn't hers. "Jinny," he had said, "it's your mesa. Macgregor means to take it and anyone who fights Macgregor, fights for us."

Jinny was remembering that when she heard the riders come into the yard and as she hurried to the front room to look through the curtained windows she guessed who the men were. Macgregor and his men were on the mesa, she knew. Rogan hadn't left.

Gus had admitted that. Several times during the morning she had heard the distant sound of rifle fire, telling her that the chase was on. She had known that sooner or later, Macgregor would stop by. It was in anticipation of such a visit that Gus had detained the sheriff until almost noon and until Wallace had been stirred to a sharp anger and was bitter, even with her, when he left.

Through the curtained window Jinny stared into the yard. Four men, she noticed, had come in riding double. They were men she didn't know, men she might have seen on one of her rare visits to town, but didn't remember. Perhaps they were four of the new men Macgregor had recently hired. With them were Arn Macgregor and Matt Billings, a scowling, flush-faced Arn Macgregor, Anger was riding him. Jinny could see that in his expression and it gave her a momentary satisfaction.

Apparently the chase wasn't going too well.

"Hey, Jinny!" roared Arne Macgregor. "Jinny Halstead! Come out here. I want to talk to you."

Still looking through the window, Jinny could see Howard and Jed Crandall standing in the open barn door. Gus Durango was with them. Frank Van Dusen had just stepped from the bunk house. He wasn't carrying his rifle but his hand was close to his gun. He must have been shaving when the men rode into the yard for half of his jaw was still lathered.

"Jinny!" shouted Macgregor again. "Jinny, come out here."

JINNY'S LIPS TIGHTENED. She stepped to the door, opened it, and moved out on the porch, aware of the sudden anger which was gripping her, anger at this big, red-faced man who stood back of all the trouble on the mesa, who had posed as her friend and had once been the friend of her father. But never, really. Men like Arne Macgregor had no friends.

"So there you are," barked Macgregor. "What kept you?"

"I don't like to be shouted at, Mr. Macgregor," said Jinny.

Her voice was sharp and perhaps unnecessarily loud. It did nothing to calm the man who faced her, or those with him. All six men looked tired, sweat stained. The two who had been riding double had slid to the ground so that now four men were mounted and two stood near the grouped horses.

"You don't like to be shouted at, huh," said Macgregor. "Sorry." His tone was heavily sarcastic. "I need two horses."

Jinny shook her head. "I have no horses for sale."

"Who said anything about buying them," Macgregor snapped. "We're taking two. Call it a loan if you want to."

Jinny bit her lips. In this she would have to give in, give in grudgingly. She said nothing. Gus Durango, she noticed, was coming forward, coming toward the porch, and her heart jumped in sudden alarm. Gus was scowling heavily. He was moving as though with some deliberate purpose in mind.

Macgregor glanced at him, then looked again at Jinny. "I sent a man here last night with a message for you," he said suddenly. "A man named Jim Canby. Did you see him?"

Jinny took a quick, deep breath. She dodged the question. "I wasn't home last night."

"Someone was here," said Macgregor.

Gus Durango had almost reached the porch, but at this, he stopped and swung to face Macgregor. "Sure," he nodded. "Someone was here. I was here. Rogan was here."

Macgregor was now staring at Gus Durango. His eyes had narrowed. He was leaning forward in the saddle. He seemed to have stiffened, and the tension he was feeling held the others in the yard. The two men on the ground, Jinny noticed, were partly crouching over, their hands close to their guns. Matt Billings had turned to face the Crandalls who were still in the barn door. And Van Dusen, who had started for the porch shortly after Gus, had stopped.

"So you were here," Macgregor was saying, and his voice had a hard edge. "You and Rogan. What happened?"

"Canby tried to deliver your message," said Gus Durango.

Jinny was shaking her head. She tried to speak but her throat seemed paralyzed, choked by the fear of what she could see building up. Her heart was thumping against the walls of her chest. She had suddenly lost control of the situation. Gus Durango had stepped in and taken over. And he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't back off.

"What do you mean?" asked Macgregor.

"Just what I said," snapped Gus Durango. "Canby tried to deliver your message. He tried to fire the barn."

"You lie!"

"No, Macgregor," said Gus. "It's no lie. You can go in the barn and look. You can see the burned hay where the fire started. You can see something else, too. You can see the place on the barn floor where Canby died."

"You lie, I tell you," thundered Macgregor.

Gus shook his head, then stood there in the yard, motionless, waiting for what he must have known would happen. A short man, stocky, and with the weight of his

years stooping his shoulders but with his lips tight and his eyes hard on Macgregor's face.

"No, Gus. No," Jinny screamed. *"Don't—"*

"I'm sorry, Jinny," said Gus. "But it was no lie. It happened. It—"

JINNY saw a gun appear suddenly in Macgregor's hand. She heard the roar of a shot, and saw Gus Durango, his gun half lifted, take an uncertain step forward. She heard him sigh and then the weight of the gun in his hand seemed to pull him forward and down. His knees folded and he dropped to the ground.

"It was a lie, I tell you," said Macgregor hoarsely. "Canby was murdered."

Those words, uttered by Arne Macgregor in hollow justification for what he had done, grated across Jinny's mind. She looked up at him, and in looking up, saw a sudden scuffle in the barn doorway. Young Howard Crandall had clawed for his gun but Jed had stepped in front of him, smashing it down, and shouting, "Not now, kid. Not now."

There was another shot, and then another and Jed Crandall, with his back to the yard, stiffened as the bullets struck him. Stiffened, half turned around, and then sank down on his face.

"Watch the kid," Jinny heard Macgregor shouting. "Watch the kid and that other fellow. Van Dusen.

Macgregor was having trouble with his horse, and so were the others who had mounted. Two men slid to the ground and let their horses dance away. Macgregor swung down and then the fourth man. Their guns covered Van Dusen, who stood motionless, his hands in the air. And Howard Crandall. A rigid Howard Crandall. Pale faced. Shocked. A Howard Crandall whose hunger for excitement had turned bitter.

Jinny Halstead had moved back across the porch and now leaned against the wall of the house, close to the door. She didn't remember having moved back. She was dazed. Her mind wouldn't work. This was like some terrible nightmare, only it wasn't a nightmare. It wasn't something she could wake up from, safe in her bed. The men in the yard were real. The shots she had heard had been real shots. And Jed Crandall and Gus—

She pushed her body away from the wall, crossed the porch and stepped into the yard. She knelt at the side of Gus Durango, put her hand on his shoulder and felt him move. A sudden hope flooded over her. Gus wasn't dead. She had assumed he was dead but he wasn't.

Jinny stood up. "Macgregor!" she called. "Macgregor. Come here."

Macgregor stood near the barn where he had been talking to Van Dusen and Howard Crandall. He looked around, said something to Matt Billings, then plodded toward her. The expression on his face was ugly, but Jinny ignored it.

"I want Gus carried into the house," she said bluntly.

"Why?" asked Macgregor.

"He's badly wounded. I want him carried into the house. I want one of your men to ride for a doctor."

MACGREGOR stared down at Gus Durango for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "Sanders," he called. "Blake. I need you for a minute."

Two of the men left the group at the barn and came toward them.

"Carry Durango in the house," Macgregor ordered. "Jinny will show you where to put him."

"Jed Crandall, too," said Jinny.

"Jed Crandall is dead."

Jinny bit her lips. She looked Macgregor squarely in the eye. She said, "Dead. Shot in the back. Murdered."

"He was reaching for the kid's gun when he was shot," said Macgregor. "I wouldn't call it murder."

"He was trying to stop Howard from pulling his gun," said Jinny.

"We saw it different."

"I still call it murder," said Jinny Halstead.

The two men whom Macgregor had summoned had lifted Gus from the ground and were waiting. Jinny turned abruptly toward the house. She held the door for them, then led the way to the room which had been her father's. The men laid Gus on the big, four poster bed, looked curiously around the room, and left.

Jinny hurried to the kitchen, stirred up the fire, put water on to boil and then from the hall closet took a roll of bandage pre-

pared long ago for any necessary emergency. She returned to the room where Gus was lying, opened his coat, and unbuttoned his shirt. His wound was high in the right shoulder and was still bleeding. The bullet was still somewhere in his body. It hadn't gone through.

She tore off some of the bandage, pressed it against the wound, and then held it there, to stop further bleeding and suddenly her hand and arm started shaking and she couldn't stop them. Tears welled up in her eyes. She was on her knees at the side of the bed and she leaned against the bed and fought desperately against the feeling of panic which was gripping her.

"What's the matter, Jinny?" asked Gus Durango, and his voice seemed to come from far away, seemed weak and tired, and yet the tone was familiar. And steadying. Some of the shakiness left her body. She tried to blink away her tears.

"You know your mother did this for me once," Gus was saying. "It was long ago. She was a brave woman, Jinny. A strong woman. Just like you."

Jinny's shoulders straightened. She shook her head. "Don't talk, Gus. Just lay there quietly. There will be a doctor here, soon."

"A doctor," said Gus, and he chuckled. "A doctor for just a little hole in the shoulder?"

Jinny stood up. She said, "Gus, why did you do it? Why didn't you just let Macgregor talk and then ride away. Words wouldn't have hurt us."

"He wouldn't have gone away — this time," said Gus Durango.

"He might have."

"No."

"If Rogan hadn't come here—"

"Canby still would have tried to fire the barn, and might have succeeded."

Jinny frowned.

"Rogan's not responsible for this," Gus continued. "Macgregor wants the mesa and the timber on it. He expected you to sell. He meant to force you to sell. You've got to look at things straight, Jinny. Trouble was in the cards before Rogan came here."

"We could have moved to town."

"Yesterday. Today was too late."

Jinny shook her head. She couldn't accept what Gus was saying. And Gus shouldn't be saying anything. He should be lying there quietly, conserving his strength.

"I'm boiling some water," she told him. "I've got to wash off that shoulder of yours, Gus. I'll be back in just a minute."

Gus smiled and nodded and Jinny left the room.

THE WATER on the stove hadn't yet come to a boil. Jinny put more wood in the firebox and returned to the parlor and as she got there, stopped. Arne Macgregor was in the room, apparently waiting for her. He stood where the light from the window fell across his face and the mask he sometimes wore, was gone. He was scowling, still flushed, and the look in his eyes was hard and direct.

"Have you sent for a doctor?" asked Jinny.

Macgregor shook his head. "No. Why should I?"

Jinny stood rigid, her hands tightly clenched. She stared at Macgregor hating him. Hating him as she had never hated anyone. Hating him with a bitterness that choked her and that drove a high color to her face and that shortened her breath.

"He's an old man," said Macgregor. "He's bad hit. He'll die anyhow. Why bother about a doctor?"

"Someday I hope you need one," said Jinny, and there was a near note of hysteria in her voice. "I hope you need one and there's none you can get. Someday—"

She bit off what she was saying and fought to steady herself.

Macgregor laughed, and his laugh was ugly. He said, "Jinny, you're all alone. Jed Crandall is dead. Gus might as well be. The Crandall kid and Van Dusen are gone. They're riding out of the country. Three of my boys are going along to see that they don't turn back too soon. You don't have anyone left to help you run the ranch, so you're going to sell it. You're going to sell it to me."

Jinny made no answer. She didn't for a moment doubt that Van Dusen and Howard Crandall were gone. Macgregor, she guessed, had given them their chance of riding out, or of facing what had happened to Gus and Jed Crandall. She couldn't blame either one for the decision he had

made. After all, this was her fight, and its cost was already too high.

"You heard me?" said Macgregor. "You'll sell."

Jinny stiffened. She shook her head. "Never! Never in the world."

"But you will, Jinny."

"No."

The porch door suddenly opened and Matt Billings looked into the room. "Lefty just rode in," he reported. "They've got Rogan trapped in a box canyon and want help to make sure he doesn't get away."

A grin slashed across Macgregor's face. "I'll be right with you. We'll ride."

Billings turned away after a quick and troubled glance at Jinny.

Macgregor crossed to the door. He stopped when he got there. He looked back. "Think it over, Jinny," he said slowly. "You're all alone. You can't run the ranch by yourself. There's nothing to do but sell."

He stood for a moment, staring at her. A big man. So big his shoulders almost filled the doorway. A domineering man, puzzled at the stubborn resistance of this girl who looked hardly grown up, and showing this now in the uncertain scowl on his face. He could run over another man, smash him down, beat him out of the way, but this slip of a girl he didn't know how to handle.

"Think it over," he said again. "I'll be back."

Turning abruptly away he crossed the porch, stepped down into the yard, and headed toward the barn where his men were waiting.

X

IT WAS GROWING DARK. THE sun had dropped down behind the Sacramento mountains. The pale blue of the sky had turned a murky grey. In the wooded hills west of the mesa the shadows were already thick. And it was cooler. The burning heat of the day was gone.

Ben Rogan sat his horse in the protective shelter of a stand of yellow pine. Somewhere behind him were Macgregor's men, perhaps still guarding the box canyon in which they had thought him trapped or perhaps now riding back to the more open country, just ahead.

That had been a close call in the box canyon. It had taught Ben a lesson he wouldn't forget. It hadn't looked like a box canyon as he had turned up it, but the walls had suddenly closed in. He had wheeled to ride out and had almost run into Macgregor's men. Shots had raked close to him and he had turned back, circled, and slid by Macgregor's men and then cut south. They hadn't immediately guessed that he had escaped. He had heard them shouting they had him trapped. He had heard them close the gap through which he had come. He had heard some man who knew these hills assure the others that he could never ride his horse up the steep cliffs of the canyon. And he had moved away from there fast and back to the edge of the open country.

Ben Rogan dismounted, tied his horse, and then rolled and lit a cigaret. He judiciously measured his dwindling supply of tobacco, a supply which would have to be increased before another day had passed. And there was the matter of food, too. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. There might be supplies at the line shack across the mesa, but the Halstead ranch was closer, and with Macgregor's men in the hills, he could risk a visit to the ranch.

He finished his cigarette, swung back into the saddle, and dropped down into the long valley just ahead, angling now toward the Halstead ranch. He had maybe three hours of darkness before the moon came up, an hour longer than the night before, time enough to cover a lot of ground.

Night had closed in over the mesa long before he pulled up in the grove of trees west of the ranch buildings. There he dismounted and tied his horse, remembering that another man had done the same thing last night. Here, or somewhere else nearby, Canby had left his horse and approached the barn on foot. And Canby was dead. It was something to think about.

The only light Ben could see was in the ranch house. The bunk house was dark. And this brought a scowl to his face. It was still early. If any of the men were around the lamp in the bunk house should be burning. Even if the men were in talking to Jinny, the bunk house light should be lit.

Ben moved from the grove of trees to

the corner of the ranch house and then along the side of the building toward the yard. At the edge of the porch, he stopped, his glance raking across the darkness of the yard, trying to probe its thick shadows. And suddenly he stiffened. A man was sitting on the edge of the porch in front of the door, a man whose figure was half hidden by the square timber against which he was leaning, and which helped support the porch roof. Who the man was Ben couldn't tell. It might be Gus, or Van Dusen, or one of the Crandalls. Or it might be someone else. Macgregor had headed this way with six of his men early in the afternoon. Ben reached for his gun. He drew it.

"Hey, you on the porch," he called sharply. "Stand up. Stretch!"

The man jerked to his feet. His hands shot into the air above his head. He turned and looked over his shoulder toward Ben and Ben was abruptly certain that this man wasn't Gus, or Van Dusen, or one of the Crandalls. His grip on his gun tightened. He said, "Steady, fellow. Steady if you want to live."

HE STEPPED up on the porch. He moved forward. The man was still looking over his shoulder and now Ben could dimly see his face, a face he didn't recognize, thin, sharp-featured, gaunt.

"Who's inside?" Ben asked.

The man gulped. "You'd better get away from here, Rogan," he said swiftly, his words almost running together. "You'd better get away while you can."

"Who's inside?" Ben asked again.

"They're all in there," said the man. "Macgregor, Billings, Chino. Half a dozen more. They—"

"They what?"

"They'll be out here in a minute."

The man was lying. Ben was sure of it. He could hear no murmur of voices from the house. No sounds at all. What this man was doing here he couldn't understand. He obviously rode for Macgregor, but that in itself was no explanation. Where were Jinny's riders? Gus, Van Dusen, the Crandalls?

"I'll take your gun," he said abruptly.

He stepped up close behind the man. His arm whipped into the air, came down, and the barrel of the gun in his hand struck sharply against the man's head. A cry, quickly choked off, broke from the man's throat. His body wilted, spilled into the yard, and lay there, motionless.

Ben stepped down from the porch. He took the man's gun, dropped it into his pocket, and still crouching, glanced from side to side. The silence of the night gave no indication of danger. After a moment Ben straightened, moved up on the porch, crossed to the door, and stood there, listening. He could still hear nothing, no sound of voices or movement from within the house. He knocked on the door and after a time knocked again and then heard Jinny's voice.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

"Rogan," said Ben. And a brief grin crossed his face as he remembered the way Jinny used his last name, and the hard and blunt sound of it on her lips.

The door was unbolted, opened, and he saw Jinny's slight figure against the background of the light from the room. She seemed tired and though her face was shadowed it was Ben's impression that it was quite pale.

"There was a man outside," said Jinny. "Is he gone?"

"A man Macgregor left here?"

"Yes."

"Let's not worry about him for a while," said Ben. "Where are the others? Your men?"

"Macgregor was here," said Jinny. "Jed Crandall is dead. Howard and Frank Van Dusen are gone, ridden out of the country by Macgregor's men. Gus is in there." She pointed to the bedroom door.

"Hurt?" asked Ben sharply.

JINNY NODDED. She bit her lips. Ben had the feeling that she was close to tears, that she had taken about all she could. He stepped into the room, closed the door, took off his hat, ran his fingers through his hair. What Jinny had said was almost unbelievable. He had anticipated nothing like this. He hadn't thought Macgregor would go so far.

"You've got what you want now," said Jinny, and there was a sudden, trembling anger in her voice. Her body had stiffened. Her hands were tightly clenched. "You've got what you want, Rogan. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"It's not what I wanted," said Ben slowly. "It would have happened anyhow."

"Never."

Ben shrugged his shoulders, knowing the uselessness of trying to argue with this girl. Her mind was made up. She would see only what she wanted to see.

"Tell me about it," he suggested.

Jinny told the story in brief, short sentences and as she talked Ben could picture the blunt, stubborn defiance of Gus Durango and the way Jed had tried to save his brother from his foolhardy recklessness.

"They carried Gus into the house," Jinny was saying. "I asked Macgregor to send for a doctor. He refused. He doesn't want Gus to live. He doesn't want Gus to be able to talk in court about the fire Canby tried to start. I would have gone for a doctor myself but they let all the horses out of the corral before they left. And a guard. They left a guard here, too, to watch me. That's one thing you can do, Rogan."

"What?"

"Ride for a doctor."

Ben shook his head. "It wouldn't work, Jinny. It wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

"Macgregor's taken over the mesa. Maybe you don't want to believe that, but it's true. He's taken this ranch house. He'll be back here, won't he."

The girl nodded.

"He'll make this his headquarters while he chases me," Ben continued "He'll have his men around here. If Doc Ulrich shows up on the road, Macgregor's men will turn him back. They'll tell him, maybe, that Gus is dead and buried."

"Not if you tell the right kind of story in town, Rogan. Not if the sheriff rides with Doc Ulrich."

Ben scowled. He considered this for a moment, then shook his head. "You count too much on the sheriff, Jinny. But even if I could start Doc Ulrich this way with a posse to force their way in, what would they find? Do you think Gus would still be alive when they got here? Would Macgregor let him live to tell his story."

Jinny twisted her hands together. She made no answer.

"Macgregor's gone so far now he's got to go all the way," Ben continued. "Even with you, Jinny. Until you've signed the papers he wants, you'll never leave here. Maybe you won't then."

HE WAS REACHING HER. For the first time since he had come here the night before Ben had the feeling that Jinny was listening to him, measuring his words. He stood up and turned abruptly toward the bedroom door. The lamp in the bedroom was burning but had been turned low. Gus Durango was either unconscious or asleep.

"How badly is he hurt?" asked Ben under his breath.

Jinny had followed him. "The wound is high in his shoulder," she whispered. "The bullet didn't go through. The wound has stopped bleeding and I've bandanged it, but if the bullet stays in, if it festers—"

The girl didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to. Ben knew what she meant. He moved into the room and laid his hand for a moment on Gus Durango's forehead. The old man's skin was warm, but not too warm. His fever still wasn't high.

The bandage on his shoulder showed no stain of blood. It seemed firmly in place.

Turning away, Ben walked back to the front room "Pack some things," he said to Jinny. "No more than you can roll up in a blanket. Bandages, alcohol or whiskey, a gun if you have one. And hurry. We might not have much time"

Jinny was staring at him wide-eyed, startled. She didn't move.

"I said hurry," Ben repeated, his voice harsh. "Can't you understand?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Since we can't get a doctor here we're going to try to get Gus to a doctor."

"But he's in no condition to be moved."

"What do we do then?" asked Ben Rogan. "Let him lie there and die?

"No, but—"

"Then pack some things. And hurry. I don't know how much time we have before Macgregor rides back. Maybe not enough."

He moved toward the door, opened it, stepped outside and closed it and then stood for a moment on the porch adjusting his eyes to the darkness of the the night. And

listening. Listening for the sound of hoofbeats.

The man in the yard groaned. He was sitting up, holding his head in his hands. He started muttering incoherently.

Ben stepped down from the porch. He used the barrel of his gun once more on the man's head and then moved on to the barn, noticing the open corral gate as he crossed the yard.

A saddled horse was in the barn, a horse probably belonging to the man who had been left here on guard. Ben led the horse outside and up to the porch. He tied it there, then hurried to where he had left King, and mounting, rode back into the yard.

Jinny was on her knees in the front room, tieing up a bundle, when he came in. She looked around at him, finished what she was doing, and then stood up.

"They'll follow us," she said slowly. "How can we ever make it to town?"

"We're not going to town," said Ben Rogan. "And if we get away from here they'll not be able to follow us until morning. Until they can pick up our trail."

Jinny stiffened. "Where are we going."

THE OLD ANTAGONISM was back in her voice, in her attitude, in the sharp, direct look of her eyes and Ben's reaction was spontaneous. They had no time to waste in argument, in bickering.

"There are two saddled horses in the yard," he snapped. "Take your bundle and climb one. I'll get Gus."

Jinny shook her head. "I"ll not move a step until I know where we're going"

Ben stepped forward. His hands reached out and came down hard on Jinny's shoulders. He shook her. Shook her with a fierceness which startled him, and suddenly Jinny was twisting, fighting back, trying to break free. Her fist jolted him in the pit of his stomach. An open hand slashed across his bruised and still swollen cheek. He let loose of her, stepped back. He felt dazed, not from Jinny's blow but from what he had done. He stared at her, at the high flush of anger in her face, at the stabbing look in her eyes.

"Keep your hands off of me," Jinny was saying, and her voice trembled. "Don't touch me again. Ever."

She had drawn the gun which she must have belted around her waist while he had been outside. She was pointing it straight at him.

"Put that away, Jinny," he said slowly. "I'll not touch you again. What I'm doing I'm doing for Gus, not you. We could never make it to town. We'll have to ride slow. Macgregor would overtake us. We're going to a place in the hills not far from Apache Crossing. When we get there I'll ride for a doctor."

Jinny appeared to be considering this, but only briefly. She shook her head. "Macgregor will find us."

"That's a chance we have to take," Ben answered. "Maybe he will. Maybe he won't. We have all night to make our trail hard to follow. Once in the heavy timber the pine beds will hide it. Now go out and climb your horse."

Jinny lowered her gun but still held it. Anger still smouldered in her eyes.

"I didn't want your help, Rogan," she said sharply. "I don't want it now. I don't need it, but Gus does."

"Then we understand each other," said Ben.

The girl nodded.

BEN turned to the bedroom. He threw back the blanket which had been pulled up over Gus Durango and as he did so, Gus opened his eyes and grinned. He said, "Hey, what's the idea?"

"We're going for a ride, Gus," said Ben Rogan.

Gus shook his head. "Not me. I don't feel like a ride, Ben. But get Jinny away. Get her away from here while you can."

"She's going with us," said Ben.

He slid his arms under Gus Durango's shoulders and knees. He said, "Hang on, old timer. Maybe this is going to hurt but I'll be as easy as I can."

He straightend, then, lifting Gus from the bed, and if Gus winced he didn't know it.

"This is a lot of foolishness," the old man muttered. "Where are we going?"

"Just for a ride, and we have only two horses so you and I will have to ride double."

"That's about what I wanted, isn't it?" said Gus. "To ride with you."

Jinny was watching from the bedroom doorway. Frowning. Apparently not un-

derstanding this quick and close friendship between Gus Durango and Ben Rogan and puzzled by it.

"You'll be riding with me," said Ben.

He headed for the door and Jinny stepped aside, then hurried to the porch door and held it open. Ben stepped through it.

"You'll have to stand here for a minute, Gus," he said slowly. "Jinny will help you."

He lowered Gus Durango's feet to the floor and then steadied the old man until Jinny took his place. After this he mounted his horse, reined in close to the porch, and with Jinny's help, once more lifted Gus in his arms.

"I'll be just a minute," said Jinny.

She hurried back inside the house.

Ben waited, restless at this delay, wondering what Jinny had forgotten. He saw her come out the door with two bundles tied together. She threw them over the other horse and swung easily into the saddle.

"Which way?" she asked briefly.

"North," said Ben. "I'll show you."

He rode out of the yard, holding Gus in his arms but with most of the weight of the body resting on the saddle.

Jinny followed them.

XI

THEY RODE AT A WALK. IT was impractical to go faster. Even this might be more than Gus could take, but there was no help for it. At the ranch, he would have died. He might still die but there was a chance, this way, that he wouldn't. The only chance open to him.

The moon came up within an hour. A moon not full tonight, but still bright enough to flood the mesa with its mellow light. Ben turned down through a wide meadow near one of the mesa wells. There were maybe two hundred cattle in this meadow, most of them bedded down. He glanced back at Jinny. Thus far he hadn't said a word to her, or she to him. She had kept behind him instead of riding at his side.

"Jinny," he called. "I need your help."

"How?" asked Jinny.

"I'm cutting through this meadow," said Ben slowly. "Wait here until I'm far ahead, until I've turned up the ridge. Then stir up the cattle. Get them on their feet, start them moving. Drive them past the place where I've turned off. Run them for several miles, then swing north and pick me up. Don't ride with me, but keep me in sight. Wherever we can find more cattle, do the same thing."

"You think a trick like this will blot our trail?" asked Jinny.

"It might help, and any help we can get, we can use."

"Then ride ahead," said Jinny.

After he had turned up the ridge, Ben looked back. Jinny was stirring up the cattle, and getting results. She almost had a stampede going when she passed him. Ben grinned and rode on, recalling the way he had shaken her and the way she fought back, and remembering how she had faced Macgregor the afternoon before. Jinny Halstead, he decided, was quite a girl. There was more dynamite in her slender figure than in many a man, twice her size.

It was growing light when they reached the edge of the timber. Half a dozen times Jinny had blotted their trail just as in that meadow only a few miles north of the ranch. She had ridden probably a dozen times as far as Ben. She was probably, Ben realized, ready to drop from weariness, but she gave no indication of it as she reined in beside him.

"How is Gus?" she demanded.

"Sleeping, I think," said Ben. "Or maybe unconscious."

Jinny bit her lips. "How much farther have we to go?"

"A long ways, Jinny."

"Shouldn't we stop for a while?"

"No. This isn't a game we're playing. We're gambling for a man's life."

Jinny stiffened. "I wasn't thinking of myself. I can ride as far as you. I was thinking of Gus."

There was no feeling left in Ben's arms. How he could hold out for the rest of the trip he didn't know. But he had to. There was no safety in this fringe of the timber on the north mesa.

"We'll go deeper into the hills," he said stubbornly.

CLARA BANE stood at the window of the office in her bank, staring

out across the Plaza. It was late in the morning. Almost an hour ago she had seen Arne Macgregor ride into town, accompanied by three of his men. He had gone to the Truitt House, and was still there. Hal Wallace, the sheriff, had been summoned to the Truitt House, and gradually, one by one, most of the men in town who were free to see what was happening, had drifted that way.

Clara tried to curb her impatience. Yesterday had been a hard day and last night hadn't been easy. No word from the mesa had reached town. Ollie Farnsworth, returning from his trip to Apache Crossing, had merely reported that he had delivered his message. And that was all. What had happened on the mesa or at the MAC ranch, she didn't know.

Ollie Farnsworth left the Truitt House and angled toward the bank, and a moment later, entered her office.

"Well?" Clara asked, swinging to face him.

"They haven't caught Ben Rogan," said Ollie Farnsworth. "Jinny's men have left her. Just pulled out. Macgregor is loaning her some of his men to keep things on the mesa in order until he and Jinny can reach an agreement on a sale price. At least that's the story he gives out. And one thing more. Macgregor says that Rogan shot and killed Jim Canby. He got Hal Wallace to swear him in as a deputy sheriff, with authority to bring Rogan in."

Clara nodded her head. None of this was very surprising. The story Macgregor had told was about what she had expected. Through it, she thought she could see the truth. Jinny's men had deserted her, or had left at her orders, or had been driven off. Macgregor had settled on the mesa. He was probably holding Jinny prisoner, and would drive at her until she agreed to sell. In the meantime his men would harry the hills in a search for Rogan, and perhaps Rogan would be able to keep out of their hands. Clara rather hoped he would. She frowned as she thought of Rogan. Frowned and then tried to put him out of her mind.

"Anything else?" she asked bluntly.

"That man I took the message to," said Ollie. "Pete Sidwell. Who is he, Clara? Where does he fit into this?"

Clara stiffened. "He doesn't," she answered, her voice sharp. "My message to him was about another matter, entirely. Don't pry, Ollie. Don't pry into my affairs."

Ollie Farnsworth moistened his lips. There was an almost haggard look on his pale, thin face. He rubbed his hands together, boney hands, long fingered. He stared at the floor. "I'm only thinking of you, Clara," he said under his breath. "That is—"

His voice wavered, broke off. He ducked his head in what might have been a nod, then backed out of the office.

Clara again looked through the window toward the Truitt House, already forgetful of Ollie Farnsworth. After a moment Arne Macgregor came out on the porch in front of the saloon. His men followed him, grouped around him. Macgregor spoke to them briefly, and afterwards stepped into the street and started straight toward the bank.

Clara caught her breath. Excitement gripped her. She backed away from the window and took a quick look at her reflection in the mirror on the wall, tucking a strand of hair in place and smoothing her fingers over her eyebrows. Moving then to her desk, she sat down and waited.

Ollie Farnsworth knocked, looked in. He seemed startled, almost frightened. "Mr. Macgregor's here," he gasped. "He wants to—"

THE DOOR BURST WIDE OPEN under the hard thrust of Macgregor's hands and Macgregor stepped into the office. He caught the door and slammed it shut, and stood in front of it, staring at Clara Bane. Staring and scowling, his face flushed dark with anger, his breath hissing audibly in his throat.

Clara looked up at him and smiled. It was a cold and frosty smile, touching only her lips. She nodded. "So you've changed your mind, Mr. Macgregor. I thought you would never enter my bank."

"I'll enter it once more," said Macgregor, his voice loud, heavy. "Once more. The day I kick you out."

"I'm afraid that day will never come, Mr. Macgregor."

"It will come," thundered Macgregor.

"And sooner than you think. What do you want on the mesa, woman?"

"The name," said Clara, "is Bane. Mrs. Bane."

"Not on the street corners or in the saloons," said Macgregor. "They've fancier names for you there."

Color flooded into Clara's face. She clenched her hands until she could feel the sharp dig of her fingernails in the palms. She knew this, of course, but it was hard to take from Macgregor. Harder to take from him than from anyone. His laugh grated across her ears, drove the tight smile from her lips.

"What do you want on the mesa?" he was asking again.

"The bank owns some cattle there," said Clara, and she tried to keep her voice steady. "I'm protecting them. That's all."

"You're lying, woman."

"The name is still Mrs. Bane."

Macgregor stared at her narrowly. He leaned a little forward. "Who do you know at Apache Crossing?" he asked suddenly. "What kind of game are you mixed up in?"

Fear struck at her then. A fear that brought with it almost a feeling of panic. She fought against it, tried to beat it down. What did Macgregor know of the men back in the hills beyond Apache Crossing, she asked herself? What could he know of them, or of her dealings with them? She had told no one that part of her plan. Not even Belle Waverley. But Pete Sidwell might have talked. Might have talked to one of Belle's girls. Pete Sidwell might have talked in spite of his assurance to her that he wouldn't.

"Well?" asked Macgregor roughly.

Clara shook her head. She looked Macgregor straight in the face, made herself look at him that way.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she answered. "I'm mixed up in no game but running a bank. And I'm busy. I wish you'd leave."

Macgregor seemed puzzled. He stared at her as though trying to read her mind, as though glimpsing part of her purpose, but not all of it. After a moment he shrugged his shoulders, turned to the door, and then looked back.

"What you're after I don't know," he rumbled. "You didn't send Rogan to the mesa just to wet nurse a herd of cattle."

"On the contrary," said Clara, "the bank is very much interested in those cattle."

Macgregor shook his head. Anger flamed again in his face. "That's not it, woman. But I'll figure it out. And when I do—I'll be back."

He slammed the door as he left.

BEN ROGAN slept until mid-afternoon. He awoke, stiff and cramped, and at first puzzled at where he was. Then he saw Gus Durango's figure on the pine bed he and Jinny had fixed for him and the memory of all that had happened came flooding back to his mind.

Jinny was still asleep in the deep shade just beyond Gus Durango. She lay on her side, one arm curled under her head, her mouth partly open. Ben, standing up now, looked down at her realizing rather abruptly that she had nice features, that she wasn't just a little girl. The blue shirt she was wearing was pulled tight across the soft swell of her breasts. A woman's breasts.

Ben scowled and turned away. He found his horse where he had tied him several hours before, got his razor, mirror, soap and a towel from the saddle bag, and went down to the nearby stream where he started the difficult task of shaving. Difficult because his face was still swollen from Chino's fists.

Gus, who had been asleep when he left, was still sleeping when he returned, but Jinny was awake and was sitting up. She was combing her fingers through her hair, trying to straighten it. Her mouth was full of hairpins. She glanced at Ben but didn't speak.

"I'll be leaving for town in a minute," said Ben.

Jinny shrugged her shoulders. She started twisting her hair into a bun.

"I ought to make it back here before morning."

Jinny still said nothing.

"I don't think Macgregor will find you," Ben continued. "If he does, don't fight him. You wouldn't have a chance."

Jinny took the hairpins from her mouth. "Don't tell me what to do, Rogan. I'll do as I please."

"You'll do as I tell you," said Ben.

"Never. As long as I live, never!"

Gus Durango moved restlessly in his bed. "Hey, you two," he called weakly. "Why do you keep fighting?"

Jinny came quickly to her feet. She hurried to the old man's side. Gus grinned at her. His face was flushed with fever. He said, "Fighting all the time. I don't like it"

"I like to fight," said Jinny. "Pay no attention to us, Gus."

"So did your mother," said Gus Durango. "You're much like her, Jinny."

Jinny couldn't believe this. She shook her head, then brought Gus some water from the canteen and held him up while he drank.

"I'm going for Doc Ulrich, Gus," said Ben Rogan. "You're up in the hills, north of the mesa. I think you're safe here, for a while. Jinny will stay with you."

"We'll get along," said Gus Durango. "Don't hurry."

BEN ROGAN dropped down through the hills to the Apache Crossing road and beyond it, swung in a long circle toward Los Prados. He had left Gus and Jinny high in the timbered forests north of the mesa, not as deep as he had hoped to get, but perhaps deep enough. It would take a good tracker to follow the trail they had left. He was sure of that.

It was nine o'clock before he reached Los Prados, and still quite dark. Doc Ulrich wasn't home. He had gone down river, his wife said, and might not be back for an hour, or even longer. He had gone to one of the Mexican homes. She wasn't sure which one.

Ben said he would be back, and turned away. He rode on to the Plaza and from its edge glanced around the square. He could see only a few saddled horses at the tie rails and the thought of a drink at the Truitt House was tempting, but he decided against it. One of Macgregor's men might be there. He might run into trouble. He couldn't risk that before he had seen Doc Ulrich. He was hungry, too, but he had eaten this morning after making camp. Jinny had thoughtfully brought some food along in her second bundle.

Turning down the street toward the river, Ben pulled up in the trees beyond Clara Bane's. He tied his horse there, then walked back, remembering, abruptly, the man he had seen as he was leaving Clara's, four nights before. That man, a stranger, had come from this direction where he also might have left his horse. Ben scowled, then shrugged his shoulders and put the man out of his mind. He opened the gate, walked up the path to Clara's door, and knocked.

His knock was answered almost immediately by Clara Bane. She wasn't dressed as she had been dressed on the occasion of his previous visit. She wore a long skirt and a white waist with a high, tight buttoned collar, and a black ribbon at the throat. Her business clothes. She seemed startled to see him. She gasped his name, then said quickly, "Come in, Ben. Come in."

Ben stepped into the room, closed the door, leaned against it and grinned at her. "Are you worried, Clara?" he demanded. "Why?"

Clara had backed away. The surprise she was feeling still showed in her eyes. The lamp light in the room glistened against the copper sheen of her hair and that faint perfume which Ben had noticed before was still here.

"Did anyone see you come here?" asked Clara.

"Why?" said Ben, still grinning.

"Macgregor was here today. He has been made a deputy sheriff, authorized to arrest you for the murder of Jim Canby."

"He'll have to catch me first," said Ben. "No one saw me come her. At least I don't think anyone did."

"Macgregor has taken the mesa. He has Jinny Halstead."

"No," said Ben. "I have her."

"You have her."

Ben was still grinning. He nodded. He said, "I have her, Clara, and I don't think Macgregor will find her right away. So what happens. Tell me."

"I don't know," said Clara slowly.

SHE MOVED deeper into the room and sank down into the settee, leaning back in its corner. She looked soberly at Ben, a slight frown showing on her face.

Ben laid his hat on the table near the

front window, then crossed toward her and stood above her, matching her frown. He shook his head and said, "Clara, it isn't fun to be chased, to be shot at, to be labeled a murderer. It particularly isn't fun if you don't know what it's all about."

"You're being well paid," said Clara.

"You mean I will be if I live."

"You didn't have to take the job, Ben,"

"No, I didn't have to take it."

"Where is Jinny?"

"Where she's safe."

"What about her men?"

"Jed Crandall is dead. Gus is badly wounded, and is with Jinny. Howard Crandall and Van Dusen have been run out of the country by Macgregor's men."

"You are sure Jinny's safe?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "What do you care? What do you care about any of us? What do you want, Clara? What are you after? The mesa."

"No."

"Macgregor?"

Clara came to her feet, her body rigid, her hands tightly clenched. She nodded her head. "Yes, that's what I want," she said under her breath. "Macgregor. I want him brought crawling to my feet, Ben. I want him squirming on his fat belly, begging for help."

There was so much passion in those words Ben was startled. He backed away a step. He shook his head.

"You think it won't happen?" asked Clara. "You think he won't crawl?"

"Not from what's happening on the mesa."

"But that's not all. It's only the start."

"The start of what?"

Clara took a deep breath. She seemed to be fighting for her self control. Some of the tension left her body. She said, "Ben, trust me. I know what I'm doing and it'll work out. Don't make me talk about it."

Ben's lips had tightened. He stared straight at Clara. "I want the whole story. You say this is only the start. The start of what?"

"I can't tell you, Ben. Don't make me."

"I want to know," said Ben stubbornly.

Clara stepped forward, close to him. She lifted her hand to his shoulder and looked up into his eyes, her head tilted back just a little. "Ben," she whispered, "Ben, trust me. Just for a few days. That's all. Just a few more days."

Her eyes were wide, deep. Deep enough for a man to get lost in. She seemed to be drawing nearer. He was suddenly aware of the faint perfume she was wearing and of the soft touch of her breasts against his chest. His arms lifted, closed tightly, almost roughly around her and she didn't struggle or pull away but seemed to flow against him until he could feel her full length against his body. His lips came down on her and found them soft, warm and then almost eager in their response.

IT WAS BEN who broke away, thrusting the woman back but still holding her shoulders. Breathing deeply and still feeling the excitement of this moment. Staring at her. Staring into those deep, wide open eyes which now held no trace of the hardness he had sometimes seen there.

"What was that for?" he asked harshly.

"I don't know, Ben," said Clara. "It just happened."

"Things don't just happen."

"Don't they?"

Ben dropped his hands to his sides. He dropped them, he knew, just in time, for the impulse to pull Clara forward again had been suddenly driving at him. He backed away a step, looked around for his hat, found it and picked it up.

"Are you leaving?" asked Clara.

"I'd better," said Ben quietly. "If I kissed you again I'd probably not want to leave. If I stayed, I'd hate myself for staying."

"Are you sure you would?"

"Yes."

"Because of who I am?"

"No. Because of what you're doing. And don't count on me any more, Clara. I'll finish the job I took and hold you to your bargain. I'll see that your earmarked herd is delivered to market. That may be easy. Macgregor probably won't bother the cattle on the mesa. I'll do another thing. I'll try to help Jinny and Gus Durango out of the mess I'm partly responsible for. But that's all. Your quarrel with Macgregor is your own."

Clara bit her lips. "You don't trust me, then."

"Why should I? Because of a kiss?"

Color flamed in the woman's face. "I didn't plan it, Ben. I tell you it just happened."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. He was scowling. He said, "Clara, what's the rest of this scheme of yours? What's the part I don't know?"

"I can't tell you, Ben."

"You mean, you won't tell me."

"All right. Put it that way. I won't."

Her body had stiffened again. Her lips were tight and the hard look had come back into her eyes. Ben stared at her for a moment, then turned to the door.

XII

IT WAS STILL DARK BUT IT wouldn't be long, now, until the moon came up to thin the night shadows. Ben Rogan stood for a moment on Clara's porch, glancing from side to side. Stepping down, he walked to the gate and angled across the street toward the trees where he had left his horse. And suddenly, just within the fringe of the grove, he stiffened, his hand dropping to his gun, lifting it. Two horses were tied here. Another beside his.

From the shadows of a tree trunk to the left came a low, chuckling, familiar voice.

"Take it easy, Ben. Don't shoot."

"Paddy!" gasped Ben Rogan. "Paddy Knowles!"

Relief flooded over him, lifting the sharp tension he had felt. He shoved his gun back into its holster. Paddy moved away from the tree where he had been waiting and came toward him. His face was shadowed but Ben could picture the grin on the man's face.

"I saw you for a moment at the corner of the Plaza," Paddy explained. "I wasn't sure it was you but I knew King. I'd know that horse anywhere."

"Did you get the money I left with Will Truitt?" Ben asked.

"Sure, but there wasn't any rush about it, Ben."

"How's the new job with Macgregor?"

Paddy Knowles chuckled. "It was the shortest job I ever held. I took it, rode out to the MAC, got wind of what was up, and rode back to town. Since then I've just been sticking around, waiting. They're saying some ugly things about you in town, Ben."

"Everyone?"

"Nope. Not everyone. Macgregor's friends, mainly. What's it all about, Ben?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't know what it's all about. I know this much. Macgregor wants the mesa. Clara Bane hired me to look after some of the bank's cattle on the mesa. That put me in Macgregor's way."

"Did you kill Jim Canby?"

"When I caught him trying to set fire to the Halstead barn and when he went for his gun."

"That part of the story didn't come out."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "It wouldn't."

Paddy scuffed at the ground. "Ben," he said slowly, "I don't have a job. You wouldn't be needing a man, would you?"

"Is it a fight you're after, Paddy?"

"Not exactly, but if that's part of it, I wouldn't run. I didn't care much for some of the men I saw at the MAC. Besides that, I'm pretty used to working for you, Ben. I just thought maybe you might need a man."

BEN ROGAN shook his hed. He could appreciate Paddy's offer and the loyalty which had prompted it, but he was building up no crew to fight Macgregor.

"Then couldn't I just sort of ride along with you?" asked Paddy.

"No," said Ben slowly, "but there's one job for me you might be able to do."

"Name it."

"Can you round up a team and wagon somewhere tonight, without causing comment?"

"Will Truitt's got a team and wagon he'd loan me. And Will don't talk much. He's close mouthed."

"Good," said Ben. "Borrow it. Throw in the wagon any blankets you can find in Will's barn. Head out toward Apache Crossing, tonight. I may catch up with you. If I don't, pull off the road into the hills about ten miles this side of the crossing. Pull off someplace where the wagon won't be seen."

"And then what, Ben?"

"Then wait for me. Expect me to show

up tomorrow afternoon or tomorrow night. If I don't, wait another day. You had better take some grub along. I don't know where you'll get it."

"I'll manage," said Paddy.

Ben scowled. He said, "Paddy, this might get you in trouble. If it does—"

"If it does," Paddy chuckled, "I asked for it. I'll be there, Ben."

His face was still deeply shadowed by his hat but Paddy Knowles was grinning. Ben was sure of it. He dropped his hand on the older man's shoulder. He said, "Thanks, Paddy. Get going."

Still chuckling, Paddy Knowles turned away, moved to where his horse was tied, pulled his short, stocky figure into the saddle, lifted his hand in a friendly salute and wheeled toward the street.

Ben waited for a moment, then followed, but short of the Plaza turned down a dark and narrow alley. He followed this, until he had passed the back corner of the Great Northern hotel and was behind the feed store. Here he dismounted and tied his horse and then on foot made his way to the back door of the hotel's restaurant. It stood open. Inside, he could see Mrs. Hammel, washing dishes. She was a big, jolly woman with dark, stringy hair and a smile that never seemed to leave her face.

"Hey," called Ben from the doorway. "Any food left?"

Mrs. Hammel jerked around. Her eyes widened as she recognized him. "Ben Rogan!" she gasped, and then looked quickly toward the door to the dining room. It was closed. She looked back at Ben, drying her hands on her apron.

"I mean it," said Ben. "I'm hungry."

"Chino's in the dining room," said Mrs. Hammel. "Matt Billings is with him, and two other men I don't know."

Her voice was a husky whisper, and for once she wasn't smiling.

"Forget them," said Ben. "I'd rather eat here. Food's always better in the kitchen."

He came in and pulled up a chair to the work table. He was presuming, he knew, but Mrs. Hammel had been the cook on the first ranch where he had worked after coming to this part of the country. She had taken an almost motherly interest in him. He knew her well. And he was hungry.

The woman took a quick look into the dining room, then closed the door. She poured him a cup of coffee, opened the ice box and took out a steak and put it on the stove, and then set a steaming bowl of soup in front of him.

Ben started eating but Mrs. Hammel didn't go back to her dishes. She fussed around the kitchen and kept looking nervously toward the dining room door.

"Quit worrying," said Ben. "They'll not come back here."

He dug into the steak and potatoes which Mrs. Hammel had heaped on his plate, now and then glancing up at her and grinning, and when he had finished, stood up and kissed her on the forehead and said, "Thanks, Ma. And don't believe all you hear about me."

"I don't," said Mrs. Hammel, "but you listen to me, Ben Rogan. Set the sheriff straight about what you've done before you come sneaking to my back door again." I don't want my kitchen shot up."

BEN MOUNTED his horse once more and rode on to where Doc Ulrich lived. Ulrich was tall, gaunt, middle aged. He had returned home some time before but was still waiting up in anticipation of Ben's visit. He didn't seem much surprised at the request Ben had to make.

"According to the story I heard," he said bluntly, "Jinny's men pulled out and left her. But it didn't sound right, at least about Gus Durango. Gus has been there too long. How badly is he hurt?"

"A bullet in the shoulder. Lodged there."

"And I suppose you toted him all over the mesa. It didn't do him any good."

"And it couldn't be helped."

Doc Ulrich shrugged his shoulders. "How far do we have to ride?"

"We can make it by morning."

"What part of the mesa?"

Ben grinned and shook his head. "I don't remember, Doc. But I think I can find it."

Doc Ulrich chuckled. "You could have trusted me, Ben. I like Gus and I like Jinny Halstead. I never did care too much for Arne Macgregor. But maybe you're wise not to talk. I'd probably have told my wife where I was going and she might

have told someone else. News spreads. I'll meet you outside in five minutes."

They left Los Prados by the Apache Crossing road and within three miles overtook Paddy Knowles in his borrowed wagon. Ben paused for just a word with Paddy, then he and Doc Ulrich rode on. The moon had come up and the night was pleasant. They didn't push their horses. There was no reason to. "If I have to probe for a bullet there's not much I can do until daylight," Doc Ulrich had mentioned.

As they rode, Doc Ulrich asked questions, and most of them Ben answered without any hesitation. He told of the fight in the barn, of his pursuit by Macgregor's men, and gave Doc Ulrich, Jinny's version of the shooting of Gus Durango and Jed Crandall. He mentioned why he had gone to the mesa, making a brief reference to Clara Bane and the court order and he tried to get Doc Ulrich to talk about Clara.

"There are only two things wrong with Clara," said Doc Ulrich. "One is her background, the stories about her, where she came from and who she was before she met Stephen Bane. The other is her determination to run the bank. She's a woman in a man's job, and the women around here won't take it, or let their men take it. If Clara had been an average woman she might have managed it, but considering who she is and where she came from, she hasn't a chance."

"She can run the bank," said Ben.

"Probably better than Steve did. But that doesn't count. To put it politely, she's still a floozie from El Paso who trapped Steve into marrying her. She may have been faithful to him after she married him. She may have been faithful since his death. But the old brand is still there. Nothing will blot it out."

"That's hardly fair, is it?"

"Who said anything about fairness. It's the way things are, Ben, and I don't know how to make them different."

They rode on, silent for a time, then Doc Ulrich spoke again, his voice troubled.

"Ben, it's a damned shame what this country's done to Clara. She's lonely, bitter, completely shut off from any normal friends. She could have turned to the girls at Belle Waverley's, or to some of the drunks in town. That's what people expected. She was too strong for that. It would have been better for her if she had been weak. Loneliness is a poison that works on the soul, and that destroys it."

AFTER turning off the road they waited until it began to grow light before climbing their horses through the thick wooded hills. Jinny heard them coming and though she quickly put away her gun when they rode into the small clearing, both Ben and Doc Ulrich had seen it.

"Hi, Jinny," called Doc Ulrich. "What's for breakfast? How about a nice, thick bear steak?"

"I almost had one for you," said Jinny. "There was a bear fooling around here last night. He kept me awake."

She was smiling at the doctor and she didn't look to Ben as though she had been kept awake. Her eyes were clear, her hair neatly combed and in place. She glanced at Ben and her smile vanished.

"How was it, Jinny?" asked Ben.

"Quiet," said Jinny. "I had lots of time to think. I didn't change my mind about anything."

Ben could have guessed that. He shrugged his shoulders and walked over to where Gus Durango was lying. Gus was awake. His skin was pale but his eyes had a feverish glaze. "You didn't have to do it, Ben," he said weakly. "I don't need a saw-bones."

Doc Ulrich came up and stood at Ben's side. He said, "Hi, Gus. So you finally stopped a bullet. I always knew that someday I'd have to dig one out of you."

"This one," said Gus, "is going to be tough. You'll never get it."

"Sure I will," chuckled Doc Ulrich. "I may have to saw your arm off and go in from the side, but that's only a detail."

They went on talking like that, joking. Ben crossed to the fire which Jinny had started. She was heating water in the coffee pot she had brought in the bundle with the food. He added more wood to the fire. Jinny was now on her knees at Gus Durango's side. She was removing the bandage from his wounded shoulder. After a time, Doc Ulrich knelt down beside her. He was still grinning, still joking, as he examined the wound.

"This will be easy," he boasted. "You'll

not even feel it when I lift the lead."

"You lie and you know it," grumbled Gus. "But go ahead. Have your fun."

A few minutes later, Doc Ulrich joined Ben by the fire. He wasn't grinning, now. He shook his head.

"It looks bad," he said under his breath. "That bullet's got to come out. Quick. It's perhaps fortunate that Gus is pretty weak. He won't feel the pain after the first minute. He won't feel anything."

"What chance has he of pulling through, Doc?"

"Not too good. He's pretty old. But then he's tough, too. He might make it. What about that wagon we passed just after leaving Los Pardos."

"It's to take Gus to town."

"I thought maybe it was. And that's about his only chance. He ought to be where I can keep an eye on him and where he can have better care than would ever be possible here. How will you get him to the wagon?"

"I'll drive it as near as possible. He'll have to be carried part of the way."

Doc Ulrich nodded. He said, "Ben, I'll need help when I start after the bullet. You and Jinny will have to hold Gus down. You across his body. Jinny on his free arm."

"How soon."

"I'll call you," said Doc Ulrich.

BEN WATCHED BLEAKLY as Doc Ulrich made his few preparations. He knew about what to expect. The bullet had to be probed, then caught and drawn, and until he lost consciousness, the process would be pure agony to Gus Durango. There was no way to relieve the pain.

Doc Ulrich called him and Ben joined the doctor and Jinny at Gus Durango's side. Gus was still making his feeble jokes. He refused the drink of whiskey which Doc Ulrich offered, saying he didn't like the brand. Jinny, pale and tight lipped, was across from the doctor.

"Now," said Ulrich.

Jinny caught Gus Durango's free arm, pulled it out and fell across it, holding it, pinning it to the ground with her body. Ben sprawled across the man at his stomach. He heard Gus scream and felt the threshing constriction of his muscles. Doc Ulrich had his knee on Gus Durango's other arm and was leaning against his chest.

That scream came again and again, and then suddenly faded in a long gasp. The straining, jerking muscles relaxed.

"That's enough," said Doc Ulrich gruffly. "You can get up now."

Ben straightened. He mopped a hand over his perspiring face. He glanced at the wounded shoulder, at the puffed, swollen, bleeding hole and the long probe in the doctor's hand. He heard the sharp intake of Jinny's breath.

"You'd better look after Jinny," said Doc Ulrich.

Ben glanced at her just as she toppled over. He got to his feet, stopped, and lifted her in his arms. She was surprisingly light. She weighed hardly anything at all.

"Don't just stand there holding her," said Doc Ulrich. "Carry her to those blankets beyond the fire. Get her some water. I can manage here."

Ben carried the girl to where her blankets were spread. He lowered her to the ground and was still bending over her when her eyes blinked open and stared up at him.

"Don't get up," he said swiftly. "I'll bring you a drink."

"I fainted, didn't I," said Jinny. "I thought I was stronger than that. How's Gus?"

"He's in good hands, Jinny."

"It must have hurt terribly. Ben, he can't stay here. He won't have a chance if we keep him here."

THIS was the first time Jinny had used the name Ben in talking to him. Always before he had been Rogan. This was the first time her guard was down, the first time she hadn't shown a rigid antagonism toward him. Ben felt a sudden lift of spirit. "I'll get you that drink, Jinny," he repeated.

The girl shook her head. "I don't need it. Ben, what are we going to do?"

"We're going to take Gus to Los Prados."

"How?"

"Paddy Knowles has a wagon for him, not ten miles from here. We'll drive it closer, carry Gus down. Tonight we'll drive him to town."

Jinny sat up. "You mean it?"

"Of course I mean it."

"What about Macgregor?"

Ben's lips tightened. "There's still Macgregor, but Gus will be safer in town than here. If we can get him there. We couldn't have made it the other night. Or maybe we could have, but I didn't think so."

A scowl gathered on Jinny's face. Her eyes darkened. She stood up, and when Ben would have helped her, avoided his hand. The old antagonism was back. Ben could sense it immediately. For only a moment had it been gone.

"All right," said Jinny slowly, "we'll go to Los Prados. And when we get there, I'll fight Macgregor in my own way. Not your way, Rogan. Not with guns. And not with your help. I want that clearly understood."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. So he was Rogan again. For a brief interval he had been Ben, and he had liked the sound of his name on Jinny's lips. And that was strange. What difference did she make to him? Why did he care what she called him, or what she thought? His stake in this game was a loan which would put him back on his feet. Jinny was incidental.

He turned abruptly away and walked over to where Doc Ulrich had started bandaging Gus Durango's shoulder.

"Did you get the bullet?" he asked.

Doc Ulrich nodded.

Gus Durango lay as motionless as though he were dead, his mouth open, his cheeks sucked in.

"Will he make it, Doc?" Ben asked.

"I don't know. He might."

"What about the trip to town?"

"We'll have to take a chance on it"

Ben nodded. He looked around at Jinny. She was staring at him, still scowling. Ben had the sudden feeling that she would never change, never give an inch, that no matter what happened he would always be Rogan so far as she was concerned. Calling him Ben had been a slip of the tongue. That moment of unguarded conversation had been an accident.

XIII

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON, Ben Rogan and Paddy Knowles drove the wagon into the hills to a point as near to the camp as practical, and after this, carried Gus Durango to it on a stretcher made of a blanket and two poles. It wasn't an easy trip down to the wagon and they didn't have only Gus to worry about. There was the constant chance that Macgregor's men, riding the hills, might stumble across them.

Doc Ulrich took his turns at one end of the stretcher and when not doing this, walked near it and kept talking to Gus, growling at him, complaining of the time Gus was costing. Jinny brought the horses.

There were still several hours of daylight left when they reached the wagon, enough to get down out of the hills before dark. Blankets had been spread in the wagon and on these the wounded man was laid. Jinny sat with him, to steady him and to lend him what encouragement she could. It would be a rough ride down to the road. Gus would feel every jolt.

Paddy drove the wagon. He had a way of handling horses which Ben had never seen equalled. Under the guidance of anyone else the trip to the road would have been much more difficult.

Near the road they crossed Four Mile creek and here they stopped to water their horses and to drink and rest for a moment. Doc Ulrich dismounted and walked up to the wagon and had a word with Jinny. Gus was either sleeping or too weak to talk. Blood had soaked through the bandage on his shoulder. Jinny looked tired.

Ben could notice this from where he sat on his horse. He dug his tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigaret. A thin one. His tobacco was running low. As he lit it, Paddy climbed down over the wheel of the wagon and came toward him

"What do I do, Ben?" he asked. "Hit the road and keep on it to Los Prados?"

"That's right," said Ben. "Slow and easy. But not too slow. We want to make it before dawn."

"What if we meet someone on the road?"

"We'll worry about that when it happens"

Paddy was frowning. "You know, Ben," he said slowly, "it's funny Macgregor didn't find your camp. If his men kept at it, kept combing the hills, it seems to me they would have picked up your

trail. I could have. You weren't awfully far back from the mesa. Maybe you were just lucky."

"Maybe," said Ben shrugging his shoulders. But the same thing which was troubling Paddy, troubled him. There had been no sign of any search for them. It seemed almost as though Macgregor had recalled his men and there was no reason for that. He couldn't afford to let Jinny and Gus escape. It didn't fit into the pattern.

"Another thing," said Paddy. "When are you going to get some rest?"

Ben grinned at that. He had had no sleep the night before. He would probably get none tonight. He had had maybe three hours rest this morning after the operation on Gus Durango. Every muscle in his body was protesting. His eyes smarted from the strain of staying open.

"You could ride the wagon with Jinny and Gus," Paddy continued. "It might be crowded, but what of it."

"Later on," said Ben. "We'd better get started, Paddy."

Doc Ulrich came back and climbed his horse. He was scowling, shaking his head. "It's asking a lot to expect a man to live through a thing like this," he muttered.

"How is he?" asked Ben.

"How do I know?" said Doc Ulrich irritably. "His shoulder's bleeding again but that was to be expected. His heart beat is faint but regular. Maybe it'll stop before we get to Los Prados. Maybe it won't. Maybe his shoulder will quit bleeding. Maybe not. And maybe there'll be trouble on the way. Maybe none of us will get there."

BEN SHOOK his head. He didn't expect that. This road was far north and east of the mesa and away from the area where Macgregor would be searching. It would soon be dark. The moon wouldn't be up for a long time.

"After a while," Doc Ulrich mentioned, "you're going to take Jinny's place in the wagon and she's going to ride her horse."

"Why?" asked Ben, frowning.

"You could use a little sleep, couldn't you? Gus doesn't have to be watched. He's too weak to thresh around. The bumps in the road he'll have to take."

"Your idea, Doc?" Ben asked.

Doc Ulrich chuckled. "No. Jinny's. But she said she'd never speak to me again if I told you. What's wrong between you and Jinny, anyhow?"

"It's a long story, Doc."

"Well, I haven't heard it but I don't like it," said Doc Ulrich. "Jinny's a fine girl. Put her in a dress and she could take your breath away, Ben. Under that outfit she wears she's a grown woman, or have you discovered that?"

"Shut up," said Ben, harshly.

Doc Ulrich laughed. "I can see you have."

Ben Rogan made no answer to this. The scowl gradually left his face. He and Doc Ulrich were following the wagon. Looking ahead he could see Jinny sitting at the side of the prone figure of Gus Durango. Her tawny hair in the pale light of the fading day, seemed to have the dim radiance of a winter moon. He got to thinking about what Doc Ulrich had said and the scowl came back. Of course she was a woman. And what of it?

Jinny slid down from the moving wagon as soon as it was dark and mounted her horse which had been hitched to the tail board of the wagon.

"Your turn, Ben," said Doc Ulrich. "Give me King's reins. If we meet anyone, we'll wake you."

Ben nodded and swung to the ground. He called, "Thanks, Jinny," but got no answer. Jinny didn't even seem to have heard him.

HE HADN'T thought he would sleep, but a hand, shaking him roughly by the shoulder, pulled him out of a loggy, unreal dream. He sat up, stiff in every muscle, and saw the moon high in the sky and realized that the wagon had stopped.

"We're almost there, Ben," Paddy was saying. "I reckon it's close to four. Where do we go when we hit town?"

Ben had considered that problem long ago, and knew the answer. He could see Jinny and Doc Ulrich, sitting their horses just back of the wagon. Gus Durango, at his side, was motionless, probably asleep.

"Well?" Paddy insisted.

"We're going to Clara's," Ben said under his breath.

"Huh?" said Paddy. He seemed surprised.

"You just drive," said Ben.

He slid to the open end of the wagon and dropped to the ground, took King's reins from Doc Ulrich and climbed into the saddle.

"We could hear you snoring fifty yards behind the wagon," Doc Ulrich mentioned. "The noise you made was probably harder on Gus than the ride will be."

Ben couldn't see the expression on Jinny's face but he imagined she was smiling.

"We've been talking over where we would go when we got to town," Doc Ulrich continued. "My house isn't large, but you're welcome to it."

Ben took a deep breath. He shook his head. "We're going to Clara Bane's."

"We're going where!" gasped Jinny.

She reined in close to him and if she had been smiling before, her smile was now gone. Her lips made a tight, thin, angry line across her face.

"We're going to Clara's," Ben said again.

"We're not," said Jinny, her voice sharp.

"Listen here," said Ben slowly. "You don't move your troubles in on your friends, Jinny. You blame me for what happened at the ranch. You probably blame Clara, too. She sent me to the mesa. All right then, let her carry part of the load. If Arne Macgregor comes after us, let her share a part of what happens."

"No."

"Think about it for a minute, Jinny. She's got a big house, plenty of room. Who else could you move in on?"

"Any one of a dozen people I could name," said Jinny.

"And suppose you did? Suppose Macgregor moved in on them too, and your friends got hurt? What then? Which one of these dozen people do you want to ask to take that risk?"

Jinny was silent. She bit her lips, shook her head. "Macgregor won't dare touch us in town."

"Are you sure of that, Jinny? Can you risk it? Think about it some more. Clara wanted the fight with Macgregor. You know she did. You talked to her. She wanted the fight and she got it. She owes you a place to stay, and if trouble comes, she's asked for it. If she gets hurt you won't have to blame yourself for what happens."

JINNY was still silent but Doc Ulrich shook his head. "I don't like it, Ben."

"What I said was true."

"Maybe, but I still don't like it."

Jinny rode closer. "You think Macgregor will still cause trouble, Rogan?"

"What do you think, Jinny? Will he take the story you and Gus can tell, lying down? Will he get out of the country and leave the MAC?"

"I don't know."

"There's another reason for going to Clara's," Ben went on. "It was your fight with Macgregor, Jinny, but Clara took it over, made it her fight. She hired me and offered to hire more men. She's doing something else. I don't know what it is but she thinks it will bring Macgregor to his knees. I want to go to Clara's because I want to bring this thing home to her, where it belongs. I want to get the issues into the open, and I think we can do it. You're not afraid of her, are you?"

Jinny stiffened at that. "No."

"Then why not go there?"

"I want to fight Macgregor the way I want to fight him."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Who's stopping you, Jinny? All I'm saying is, let's take Gus there so that if Macgregor comes after him, Clara will have to face it. And not some friend of yours who might get hurt."

"I dont like it," muttered Doc Ulrich, "but I'm afraid it's the only thing to do."

Ben had the feeling Jinny was about ready to agree. He waited quietly.

"Rogan?" she said suddenly.

"What?" Ben asked.

"Is there any other reason for going to Clara Bane's?"

"None."

"Is she expecting us?"

Ben shook his head.

She might not want us."

"She probably won't," said Ben grimly.

"You mean, we just move in on her?"

"That's right."

Jinny was silent for a moment, then nodded. Without another word she rode after the wagon which had gone on ahead. Ben and Doc Ulrich followed her.

THEY PASSED through the outskirts of the town, half circled the Plaza,

and took the road toward the river. There were no light in any buildings. They saw no one. Paddy stopped the wagon in front of Clara Bane's. He looked down at Ben who had dismounted and was tying King to one of the fence posts.

"You and Doc Ulrich get Gus on the stretcher," Ben ordered. "I'll break in."

A brief smile touched his lips. That's about what it amounted to, he told himself. Clara wasn't going to like this. She wasn't going to like it at all. She wouldn't want them staying here, or the danger they might bring. This, very definitely, wasn't a part of her plan.

Ben opened the gate and moved up the walk to the porch. He stepped to the door and knocked. Knocked sharply and kept on knocking. "Clara!" he called. "Clara, wake up!"

After a minute he heard her voice through the door. A high voice. Startled. Betraying a trace of fear.

"Who is it?"

"Rogan," Ben answered. "Open the door."

"Ben! Ben Rogan! But it must be almost morning."

"Open up, Clara."

The door opened, but only a few inches. "Ben, what is it?" Clara was asking. "What—"

Ben reached out and thrust the door wide open. Clara had backed quickly away but he could see her in the dark shadows of the room, dressed probably only in her nightgown, a thin, almost ghostly figure.

"Get something on," he said gruffly. "I think I can find the lamp. We've a man outside who's been wounded."

"Who, Ben?"

"Gus Durango."

"But you can't bring him here. You can't—"

"We have, Clara." Ben looked over his shoulder. Paddy Knowles and Doc Ulrich were coming up the walk with the blanket stretcher. Jinny was with them.

"We have, Clara," Ben said again. "You'd better get dressed."

He stepped into the room, blundered across it, and started feeling for one of the wall bracket lamps. He found one, lifted it down, removed the chimney and lit a match. As it flared up he caught a glimpse of Clara Bane in the far end of the room near an open door. Her hair was in braids, over her shoulders. Her gown hung shapeless, almost to the floor. In her hand was a gun which she had probably carried with her when she came to answer his knock. Ben lit the lamp, replaced the chimney, then set the lamp back in its bracket. When he looked around, Clara had disappeared and the door near where she had been standing, was closed.

PADDY and Doc Ulrich came in, carrying the stretcher. Jinny followed them into the room and shut the front door.

"Where do we take him?" asked Doc Ulrich.

"Just a minute," said Ben. "I'll find out."

He walked back to the door to Clara's room and called, "Clara, where do we take Gus?"

"I don't care where you take him," came Clara's answer, and there was a sharp edge to the words.

"There's another bedroom over this way," said Doc Ulrich. "It was Stephen's room. I've been here a good many times to see Stephen Bane. How about it?"

"Take it," said Ben. He moved to where Jinny was standing. "Scared, Jinny?"

"No."

"She doesn't like it."

"I wouldn't either."

Clara came into the room. She had dressed but hadn't put up her hair and at the sight of Jinny she came to an abrupt stop. "This is more than I expected," she said slowly, staring at Ben. "Is she staying here too?"

"Why not?" asked Ben.

"I don't think we'll get along," said Clara.

Jinny shook her head. "We won't."

The two women were staring at each other. Ben looked at Clara, then at Jinny. He tried to keep back the smile which was tugging at his lips. Jinny's body was rigid but no more so than Clara's. Their eyes were locked. And Jimmy wasn't giving an inch. She wasn't frightened. She wasn't afraid.

"Don't think I wanted to come here," she said bluntly. "There was just no other place to take Gus Durango"

"Haven't you a ranch on the mesa?" asked Clara Bane.

"Yes, but your friend Macgregor wants it."

"He's no friend of mine."

"Or mine," said Jinny.

This solved nothing. It didn't ease the tension. Doc Ulrich and Paddy Knowles came out of the other bedroom and Ulrich said, "Hello, Clara. This is nice of you."

"I don't seem to have much choice in the matter," Clara answered. "How badly hurt is this man you brought here?"

"He has maybe an even chance of getting well. Maybe less."

"You'll take care of him?"

"Jinny and I."

Clara Bane shrugged her shoulders. She looked from Doc Ulrich to Paddy Knowles, then to Jinny, and then to Ben. And then she said a strange thing.

"Maybe it makes no difference. Maye it's all over by now. If you'll excuse me, I'll go back to bed."

No one gave any answer and with one final glance around the room, Clara Bane turned to her door.

XIV

PADDY KNOWLES RETURNED the team and wagon to Will Truitt's barn, and after this, stabled Jinny's horse and King in the shed behind Clara's house. When he had finished these tasks it was beginning to get light. In the front room he found Ben Rogan sitting in a chair near the window, staring moodily into the street. The parlor lamp had been turned out but the lamp in the bedroom where Gus had been taken was still burning. Jinny was with Gus.

"I think I'll start the kitchen fire and make some coffee," Paddy suggested.

Ben only shrugged his shoulders and continued staring through the window. His thoughts weren't pleasant. He had been doing a little guessing and he didn't like what he saw. Why it hadn't occurred to him earlier, he didn't know. Perhaps because the plan was so simple. He had been looking for something more involved, some trick more deeply hidden.

Clara had said she meant to bring Macgregor crawling to her on his knees. She had admitted that the struggle on the mesa was only a part of her plan and had refused to say any more. And perhaps Ben was guessing wrong, but he didn't think so. Arne Macgregor had climbed the mesa with most of his crew. He had been there now for three days. This was the fourth. He had left only a few men on the MAC ranch. And while Macgregor was on the mesa, rustlers could have hit the MAC. They could have driven off his cattle or stampeded them into the wastelands to the south. They could have burned down his buildings.

Was this a fantastic guess? Ben didn't think so. Only a financial disaster could bring Macgregor on his knees to Clara Bane for a new loan or the extension of an old one. Only a blow at the MAC ranch could bring about such a complete disaster. To have beaten Macgregor on the mesa wouldn't have been enough.

It was fully light outside. In another few minutes the sun would be up. Paddy brought in a cup of coffee and Ben drank it and set the empty cup aside. He heard the sound of a door opening and closing and then footsteps behind him and turning his head, he saw Clara.

She wore a dark skirt and white blouse. Her work clothes. Her hair was neatly combed, the tight braids circling the crown of her head. And she was smiling as though nothing had happened, as though nothing stood between them. Her eyes were clear, bright, confident.

"If I didn't make you feel welcome last night, Ben, I'm sorry," she told him. "I'm always out-of-sorts when I first wake up. But I soon get over it."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. He looked away from her, looked out the window again. He didn't get up.

"Is someone going to bring you a report?" he asked.

"A report?" asked Clara.

"Yes. From the MAC."

FOR A MOMENT there was no answer. Ben scowled at the street and waited. He heard the woman move closer, then felt the light touch of her hand on his shoulder.

"Ben, what do you mean?"

"Don't you know, Clara?"

"Of course not. Why would I get a report from the MAC?"

Ben's lips tightened. "What was going to happen out there, Clara? Was it just

Macgregor's cattle your men were after or were they going to burn him out, too? How far were they to go?"

That hand on his shoulder grew heavy. The fingers dug into his skin. Ben turned and looked up. Clara wasn't smiling, now. Her eyes had hardened.

"Well?" Ben insisted.

With an effort, Clara seemed to smooth out the tension in her face. Her hand dropped from Ben's shoulder. She shook her head. "Ben, I don't know what you're talking about. Wait until I have a cup of coffee, then walk up to the bank with me."

She didn't wait for his answer but turned toward the kitchen and a moment later Ben heard the sounds of laughter from the kitchen. Paddy Knowles apparently had a way with women as well as horses.

He stood up and crossed to the door to the bedroom where they had taken Gus. Jinny sat in a chair near the bed. Gus Durango was sleeping.

"I'm going to walk uptown with Clara," he said briefly. "I want to talk to her."

"You don't have to explain things to me, Rogan," said Jinny Halstead.

Her voice was sharp. Her eyes clear and direct.

"Whenever you want it," said Ben, "Paddy Knowles will fix breakfast. I'll not be gone long."

"Don't hurry back," said Jinny. "In fact, it's all right with me if you never come back."

She was hard, harder than Clara Bane. She wouldn't fight Macgregor on the mesa but she would never have given up her claim, no matter what court delays she faced. And she would never forgive a certain Ben Rogan for the part he had played in this struggle.

Ben shrugged his shoulders and turned away and at the front door, waited for Clara.

THEY WALKED toward the Plaza. It was a clear, bright morning. There was till no heat in the sun, which had just climbed above the eastern horizon, but there would be. By noon the day would be hot. Ben could already sense it.

He glanced at Clara. She was looking straight ahead, a slight frown still on her face. The stiff brimmed straw hat she was wearing was tilted at a slight angle. Ben started to speak then changed his mind. They came to the Plaza, still deserted in this early morning hour. They crossed it to the bank. Clara drew a key from the purse she carried, fitted it in the lock, turned it and opened the door. "Coming in, Ben?" she asked.

Ben nodded. He followed her into the bank, waited while she relocked the front door and then walked with her to her office. There, Clara took off her hat and fooled with her hair for a moment, loosening it, then turned to face him. Her frown was gone but she wasn't smiling. There was a questioning look in her eyes.

"Well, Ben?" she asked quietly.

Ben moved forward. "You know what I want, Clara. The truth. What was the rest of your plan? You didn't intend to fight Macgregor only on the mesa?"

"Didn't I?" said Clara, and she seemed almost laughing. "Didn't I? Careful, Ben. The last time you came this close to me, something happened."

"It can happen again," said Ben.

He reached out and pulled Clara into his arms. His lips came down on hers in a hard, bruising kiss, and for a moment he held her that way, conscious of the pull of her body and the softness of her flesh and the response he could feel. Then abruptly he straightened and pushed her back.

"Yes," he said grimly. "It can happen again, or fifty times, and I will still get my answer. Tell me Clara. Tell me the whole story."

Clara was looking him straight in the eyes, not flinching. Her lips moved. "What if you know it, Ben? What if you've guessed it?"

"You sent men in to strip his range, to burn him out while he was chasing me on the mesa?"

"Why not? I told you what I meant to do to him, Ben. Was there any other way?"

Her body was stiff, her hands clenched tightly at her sides.

"Why, Clara?" asked Ben quietly.

CLARA BANE stooped and pulled open the bottom drawer of her desk. From it she drew a strong box which she opened with a key in her purse. She took out an

envelope and handed it to Ben and then turned away and crossed to the window.

Ben looked in the envelope. It held a thousand dollars in currency. Nothing else.

"Just after my husband died," said Clara, "a campaign was started to raise money for a church. Everyone was asked to contribute money. What you are holding was my contribution—in my husband's name. Stephen wanted the church. If he had lived he would have been on the committee."

Ben couldn't see Clara's face. Her back was to him. She was staring through the window. Her voice was low, but not very steady. He could feel the tension building up in it.

"Ollie Farnsworth took my contribution to the committee. Macgregor was head of it. He turned it down. He sent it back to me with a message, a message which was later repeated in every saloon and on every corner in town. This was the message, Ben. *'God doesn't take money from tramps.'*"

Ben was scowling, still holding the envelope in his hand. Clara had whirled around and was facing him, her lips so tightly drawn he could hardly distinguish them, her eyes blazing with anger.

"That's what he said," she half shouted. "Arne Macgregor speaking for God. That's a joke, Ben. You don't know how good a joke it is."

"You knew him in El Paso," Ben guessed.

"Yes. I knew him in El Paso. He wasn't speaking for God when he came to El Paso."

Ben laid the envelope he was holding on the desk. He found himself feeling strangely sympathetic toward Clara, resenting what Macgregor had done, and not understanding it or why Macgregor would do it.

"Maybe I didn't fight fair," Clara was saying, "but what about Macgregor? Was what he said fair? All I asked after Stephen died was a chance at a decent life. I had been Stephen's wife for two years and they were good years even if the women in this town didn't accept me. In time I could have made them. In time I could have had what I wanted, if Macgregor hadn't stood in the way. If he hadn't kept the old stories alive. The returning of that contribution was only one thing he did. He took his money out of the bank, saying it couldn't be trusted to a woman of the streets. He started the rumor that I brought Belle Waverley here and owned her place. I didn't bring her here but I have been her friend. I don't own her place. Sometimes at night there's a knock on my door and a drunken man outside asks me if I'm receiving. Macgregor keeps hinting that the only way I can balance my books is with what I make on the side."

Her voice had grown louder. Again she was almost shouting. Ben moved toward her. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. He said, "Clara, that's enough! It's enough, I tell you."

She pulled away from him, shook her head. "For two years I've taken it, Ben. And for almost two years I waited, thinking it might end, believing that if I lived the way I should the past might be forgotten. Then I started to plan, started to look forward to this day. And it's here, Ben. It's here."

Over Clara's shoulder Ben saw two men ride in from the north road. His eyes widened. The men were Frank Van Dusen and Howard Crandall. They pulled up in front of the Truitt House but didn't dismount. Ben swung toward the door.

"I'll be back, Clara," he said abruptly.

VAN DUSEN and Crandall stared down at him from their saddles. Both men showed the strain of a long ride. Van Dusen hadn't shaved. His eyes were shadowed and webbed with red lines. His shoulders sagged. Crandall seemed to have aged. He was still a boy but a more sober boy than Ben had met on the bluff.

"What's happened?" Van Dusen demanded. "Where's Jinny?"

This was the man whom Ollie Farnsworth had warned him against, but at least he had come back. He had been ridden out of the country and had returned, apparently wasting no time.

"She's at Clara Bane's," Ben answered. Gus is there, too. Badly wounded."

"Macgregor?"

"I don't know. On the mesa, probably. Or maybe on his way to town."

Van Dusen scowled, nodded. He lifted the reins of his horse and rode on, half

circling the Plaza and turning down the road toward the river.

"Well, Crandall?" said Ben.

Crandall bit his lips. "They killed Jed."

"I know."

"They shot him in the back. I had grabbed for my gun. Jed yelled at me to wait. He stepped in front of me, knocked it out of my hand. And they shot him. Two of them. A man with a scar on his cheek and another man, a short, thin fellow."

"How far did Macgregor's men ride you?"

"Almost through the Mescaleros. They told us if we came back they'd kill us. We came back. Ben, I want to borrow a gun."

Ben Rogan nodded. He said, "Sure, Crandall. Why don't you ride on to Clara's. I'll bring you one."

"I want one now."

The boy's voice had a flat, hard sound. His eyes looked almost feverish.

"What are you going to do, Crandall?" Ben asked.

"Wait for them. Wait here in the Plaza. They'll ride into town. I know they will."

"You're doing this for Jed, aren't you"

Crandall took a deep breath. He nodded.

"You owe Jinny something, too," Ben went on. "You were working for her. You were going to stick. Well, Jinny's at Clara Bane's. If Macgregor and his men hit town, that's where they'll head. And it's where you belong, Crandall. Where you can make your bullets count. I don't have an extra gun right now, but ride to Clara's and I'll get one for you."

Crandall seemed to consider this. After a moment he nodded. "How do I get there?"

Ben told him and then watched him ride on and afterwards looked back toward the bank, thinking of Clara and what she had told him and trying to guess its meaning in terms of what to expect.

"'Lo, Ben," called a voice behind him.

Ben Rogan turned and saw Will Truitt standing in the door of his saloon. The short, stocky, dark haired man held a broom in one hand. The other was lifted in a friendly greeting.

"You're up early, Will," said Ben.

"So are some other folks," said Will Truitt. "Come on in. I'll buy you a drink."

Ben shook his head to this but moved to the board walk, stepped up on it, and crossed to the Truitt House. The interior of the saloon with its drawn curtains was dark and the faint smell of malt and stale smoke still hung in the air.

"Name it," said Will, heading for the bar.

"Make it plain water," Ben shrugged. "I'll have my drink tonight."

"Maybe," said Will.

Ben Rogan chuckled. He said, "All right then. Maybe."

Will Truitt poured two glasses of water. "Ben," he said slowly, "after some things Macgregor said in here the other day I looked at that paper you left in my safe. Then I started putting things together and getting answers. You're working for Clara, aren't you? Fighting Macgregor."

"In a way."

Will nodded. "I always knew it would come. I expected it sooner. In a way you can't blame her for hating Macgregor."

"But why does Macgregor hate her?" Ben asked. "What is the point of it?"

Will Truitt sampled the water. He made a face and pushed it aside. "If you know Macgregor, that's easy. Twice a year, sometimes oftener, he goes to El Paso and lets down, paints the town red, has a rip-snorting time. Then he comes back here with his spare cash gone and his self respect in the mud. His conscience slaps him down. He feels dirty and guilty and he probably swears he'll never go to El Paso again. He goes on the wagon and sin becomes an awful thing."

"What's this got to do with Clara?"

"Everything. Clara is a reminder of sin. She's the evil he wants to cast out of his life. She's everything that's rotten in El Paso, and she's here in Los Prados where he has to see her every time he comes to town. He hates her, not because she's Clara Bane, but because she's the other side of his life, the dark and ugly side."

"She's not like that, Will."

"Of course not, but to Macgregor she is. To Macgregor she is a constant evidence of his weakness, a weakness which he must destroy."

Ben lifted the glass of water, drained it, and set it down. He moved to the door,

looked toward the bank. Ollie Farnsworth was just leaving it. He cut across the Plaza in his awkward, leaning walk, came to Borghoff's corral, turned in there, and a moment later reappeared, mounted probably on one of Clara's horses. He turned down Front street at a stiff gallop.

"What about Ollie Farnsworth?" Ben asked.

"He's crazy about Clara," said Will Truitt, "and I can't blame him. Ollie's wife nags him to death. And Clara's not hard to look at, Ben. She's a damned attractive woman. If sin comes in the form of Clara, I'm all for it."

Ben Rogan grinned. He said, "So am I," and stepped outside.

The sun was well up in the sky. The Plaza was coming to life. Another day was here.

XV

SHORTLY AFTER BEN AND Clara had left the house, Jinny Halstead went out to the kitchen for breakfast. Paddy Knowles grinned his welcome, poured her a cup of coffee, and started frying eggs and potatoes. He wouldn't let her do it.

"Ben Rogan's lived on my cooking for close to four years," he boasted. "And I reckon he's husky enough. How many eggs? About six?"

"One," said Jinny.

"We'll settle for three. You could do with a few more pounds, Jinny."

In spite of herself, Jinny laughed, then looked at Paddy thoughtfully. "You know Rogan pretty well, don't you?"

"Ben? Sure."

"All right," said Jinny. "Ben. Tell me, Paddy. Why did he take the job Clara offered him?"

"Well," said Paddy, slowly, "he lost his horses. They were rustled. You knew that."

Jinny nodded.

"Then he owed Clara money on a loan, but I don't think that's the reason he took the job. As I figure it, Clara made him a proposition. A good one. And besides, Ben never did like Macgregor. And besides that, Chino beat him up. Chino is one of Macgregor's men. Chino boasted they had run Ben out of the country, but Ben isn't the kind to run. Eat your eggs and potatoes."

Jinny started eating and as she thought of all that had happened, the frown came back to her face. Things had gotten completely out of hand, had gone so far that she didn't know what to expect now. In the beginning of her trouble with Arne Macgregor she had been able to bluff, beautifully, always planning, when the pressure got too heavy, to pull out and make her battle through the courts and sheriff's office. Then Ben Rogan had appeared and Macgregor had struck. He had struck at the mesa suddenly and more viciously than Jinny had ever dreamed he would. She hadn't wanted shooting. She hadn't wanted to hold the mesa at the cost of men's lives, but Jim Canby and Jed Crandall were dead and Gus had been badly wounded.

And that wasn't the end. Macgregor couldn't stop now. Wouldn't stop. He would come after them here and he was strong enough with the sheriff to cover up whatever he did.

Jinny glanced at her plate and was surprised to discover how much she had eaten. She pushed back her chair from the kitchen table.

"Not bad," said Paddy Knowles. "Eat my cooking for a while and you'll put some meat on those bones. Ben ain't never said, but I've a notion he likes his women hefty."

"I'm not interested in how Ben likes his women," snapped Jinny.

SHE LEFT the kitchen and went back to Stephen Bane's bedroom. Gus was still sleeping. She glanced at him, then looked at her reflection in the mirror, turning from one side to the other, still frowning. She was thin, but not too thin. Or was she?

A flush of color came to her face. She swung away, crossed to the window and looked out into the street and then caught her breath. Frank Van Dusen had pulled up in front of the house and was dismounting.

She was at the door to meet him. She had worried about Frank Van Dusen and Howard Crandall and what had happened to them. Frank at least was safe and she was glad and her face must have shown

it. She said, "Frank! Frank! Is it really you?" and put out both her hands.

Frank Van Dusen caught them and suddenly pulled her forward. And then his arms were around her. Tight. So tight she could hardly move. And his face was against hers, his lips searching for her mouth, his beard scratching her skin.

For an instant Jinny was too startled, too surprised at this to do more than stiffen. Then grimly, desperately, she was fighting, twisting, thrusting at his chest, trying to break away.

Van Dusen let her go and she drew back, breathing deeply, feeling a hot, burning anger. She stared up at him. Stared into his scowling face and into the dark eyes which seemed to be measuring her and which seemed puzzled.

"Why did you do that?" she asked sharply.

"I've wanted to, Jinny," said Van Dusen. "I've wanted to for a long time. And when you met me—just from the way you looked—" His voice trailed off.

Jinny bit her lips. "I was glad to see you. Glad you had escaped from Macgregor's men. That's all Frank."

Van Dusen stared at her for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Jinny. If that's the way you feel, we'll forget it. But what are you going to do? You can't stay here."

"Why can't I?"

"The men who rode us into the hills told us Macgregor's plans. They said he'd never stop until he had the mesa, even if he had to kill you. They weren't joking. They weren't joking when they shot Jed Crandall and Gus Durango. They'll be after you here and who will stop them? Not Rogan. He'll run, just as he did on the mesa. And I can't stop them, Jinny. And you can't bluff them any more."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Jinny.

"Come with me. We'll head for Santa Fe. We'll get to a United States marshall. We'll call in the law and fight this as you wanted to fight it. The only way we can."

"What about Gus Durango?"

"They won't bother him, Jinny."

"Are you sure, Frank?"

"Of course."

Jinny frowned. She shook her head. "Come in, Frank. Give me a minute to think."

SHE LEFT VAN DUSEN with Paddy Knowles, who had listened with a disapproving scowl to their conversation, and went to Gus Durango's room, already knowing what her decision would be. She wouldn't leave. Couldn't. But the temptation was there. What Van Dusen had suggested was what she might have done if she hadn't waited on the mesa too long.

She heard Howard Crandall arrive and went out to talk to him, and his bitterness when he mentioned what had happened on the mesa, was so sharp she could feel it. Without asking him, she knew why he had returned. And she knew, too, that nothing she could say would change his mind. Once, he would have listened to her.

Paddy Knowles had cooked up more breakfast for Van Dusen and Howard Crandall and the two men went to the kitchen and sat down to eat. Jinny glanced into Gus Durango's room. He was still sleeping. She crossed to the front door, stepped out on the porch, and looked up the street, wondering why Ben Rogan hadn't returned and suddenly wanting to see him, wanting to feel the assurance of his presence.

And that was wrong. It was all wrong, but the feeling was too sharp to be denied. And it confused her. It was a new element in the pattern of her thinking which tipped all other values out of line. It was still Rogan who had brought things to a head on the mesa. It was still Rogan who worked for Clara Bane. But he had helped Gus escape. He had saved her from being held by Macgregor. He had brought Doc Ulrich into the hills.

Jinny pulled in a long, slow breath. She stepped down from a porch, walked to the gate, opened it, and started toward the Plaza, walking rapidly.

BEN ROGAN sat on the edge of the board walk in front of the Truitt House and watched the town come to life. Watched the stores, one after another, open. Watched some of the Mexicans who lived in town cut across the Plaza toward their work in the bean fields, down river. He spoke to several men who came along the street, men whom he knew, men who showed their surprise on seeing him, well

aware, probably, of Macgregor's charges.

Will Truitt came to the door and Ben asked him about the sheriff.

"He got a call yesterday to the south end of the county," Will answered. "Hal Wallace is an old hand at ducking trouble."

Ben was half pleased at this. Wallace would have backed Macgregor. He was sure of it. The sheriff, if he had been here, would only have been another force with which he would have had to contend.

A man rode into the square across the Plaza. He turned his horse into the vacant lot next to the bank, swung to the ground, looped the reins over the tie-rail close to the building and stepped back to the street. He was tall, quite tall and rather slender. Ben didn't recognize him. After a glance around the Plaza the man entered the bank through the door which Ollie Farnsworth must have left unlocked.

Ben sat where he was for a moment, curious about the man, wondering if he could be the one bringing Clara the message she was expecting. He got to his feet and angled across the Plaza, stepping up on the board walk again when he got to the vacant lot. He stared at the horse tied there. One of his horses. One that had been taken by the rustlers. A horse he had never expected to see again. A horse supposedly sold to the Apaches.

Anger that was sudden, sharp, and bitter swept over him, leaving his skin icy cold and tightening his breath. This fitted in. He should have seen it before. It was there in the picture. All the time.

His hand dropped down and touched his gun, making sure it wasn't bound in its holster. He moved quickly on to the bank and let himself in. The lobby was empty. The office door was closed. Through it he could hear the murmur of voices. Clara's voice and the deep, rumbling voice of the man. He stepped forward and opened the office door.

Clara and the man were both standing and both swung to face him as he came in. Clara seemed pale. Her eyes held a wide, almost dazed expression. The man towered above her. He was sharp featured, deeply tanned. His face was a young-old face, hard in its expression, bitter in its lines. The man's right hand was close to his gun. His body was suddenly tense.

"Come in, Ben," said Clara. "You might as well know what happened. This is Pete Sidwell."

Her voice had a flat sound. She turned and walked to the window and stood there, her back to the room, her shoulders sagging.

"You're Rogan," guessed Sidwell.

BEN NODDED but didn't speak. The name, Pete Sidwell, held no meaning for him. But he knew this man, had seen him once before, had met him in front of Clara Bane's several nights ago. The deep, growling voice held a familiar ring. And he could figure the part Sidwell had played in Clara's plans.

An ugly, scowling look had come into the rustler's face. "You didn't hold Macgregor on the mesa," he said sharply. "If you had, things would have worked out differently."

"What happened?" asked Ben.

"We hit the MAC this morning. We ran into a trap. Some of us didn't get away."

Ben said nothing. He felt no sympathy for this man, or for those who had followed him. He felt no responsibility for the trap into which the rustlers had fallen. But he was curious about it. Macgregor must have had some warning of what was to happen and must have left the mesa and returned to his ranch. And that would explain why there had been no extensive search through the hills.

"Get the money, Clara," Sidwell ordered.

Clara didn't move. Didn't turn. Didn't answer.

Sidwell swung toward her. "Clara," he grated. "Get the money. The rest of the money."

Clara still made no reply. She gave no indication she had heard. And perhaps, Ben thought, she hadn't. She stood at the window, facing the realization that her plan had failed, and this was bitter to take.

Sidwell moved up to where the woman was standing. He reached out, caught her by the shoulder, jerked her around. "The money," he said again. "I came here for the money."

Ben stepped forward. "Just a minute," he interrupted, and his voice was blunt, un-

compromising. "Before we talk about money, let's talk about horses."

They both turned to face him. Sidwell, scowling, tense. Clara with a quick intake of her breath, her eyes wide, startled.

"Horses?" growled Sidwell.

"Yes," said Ben. "Horses. To begin with, where did you get the horse you just rode into town, the horse that's tied outside?"

"From a friend, if it's any of your business," snapped the rustler.

Ben shook his head. He knew where this was leading but he couldn't turn back, didn't want to turn back. "Not from a friend, Sidwell," he answered. "You rustled that horse. Where's the rest of the herd?"

"What herd?"

"My herd. Where did you drive them?"

"You're talking Dutch. I don't know what you mean, Rogan. I didn't rustle your horses."

"A lie, Sidwell. Where are they?"

SIDWELL made no answer, but an answer would come. It would come blasting from his gun. Ben could read the promise in every line of the rustler's body, in the narrow, hard, violent look in his eyes. This man had lived by his gun. It was the crutch he had depended on in every crisis he had faced. It was what he would turn to now.

"A lie, Sidwell," said Ben once more. "Where is my herd?"

The rustler shook his head. A brief, bitter smile touched his lips. "You should have stayed on the mesa, Rogan," he said heavily. "Instead—"

The hand which had been poised just above his gun slapped down and then up, and as Ben clawed at his holster he knew his draw would never be in time. This man was faster than he. More practised. He should have guessed it. The roar of Sidwell's shot dinned against his ears as his gun cleared the holster. He felt the tug of a bullet at the shoulder of his coat. And he saw, even as he fired, that Clara had grabbed Sidwell's arm, perhaps disturbing his aim.

The rustler's body jerked. The gun he was holding swung wider. A look of wonder, of surprise, crossed his face. His lips moved in an effort to speak but no words came from his lips. He rocked forward, sagged, pitched suddenly to the floor.

Ben lowered his gun, aware of the cold touch of perspiration on his forehead and the sudden trembling in his knees. He looked at Clara and saw her staring down at Sidwell and then saw her turn suddenly away and cover her face with her hands. And for a moment, then, the only sound in the room was the sound of her muffled sobbing.

Ben's stomach was beginning to kick up just as it had after the gun fight in the Halstead barn. He moved forward, stooped over and made a brief examination of Sidwell, then straightened. He had killed another man, a man who had deserved to die as much as Jim Canby. But he didn't feel good about it.

"Clara," he said sharply. "Clara, look at me."

The woman turned toward him, lowering her hands from her face. Tears streaked her cheeks. She looked pale, haggard.

"I'm through, Clara," Ben continued. "I said I would hold you to your bargain on the loan, but I won't. Instead, you can pay me for the horses you had Sidwell drive away."

"Ben! I didn't—"

"Of course you did. You needed someone to strengthen Jinny's hand on the mesa, someone who didn't like Macgregor and would fight him. You picked on me, and to get me for the job you had Sidwell raid my ranch while I was away, just as you planned on having him hit the MAC."

Clara was shaking her head. "No, Ben. No, I—"

Footsteps hammered through the bank lobby. Men who had heard the shooting crowded into the room. They stared at the motionless figure on the floor, at Ben, and at Clara, who was again covering her face with her hands.

"Clara can explain what happened," said Ben bleakly. "Afterwards, if anyone wants to talk to me, I'll be around."

He pushed forward, through the crowd and into the bank lobby, wondering what Clara would say in explanation, how much she would tell, what story she would give. Actually, he didn't care. He was sick at what he had learned.

Jinny Halstead appeared at the far corner of the Plaza. She hesitated there for a moment, then started across it in the direction of the Truitt House or the Great Northern hotel, walking rather fast, her hands in her jacket pockets. Ben watched her from the door of the bank, scowling, and realizing that a man knew where he stood with Jinny. She was direct, honest, frank in her relationships. There were no hidden meanings in the things she said.

He left the bank and in front of the Truitt House, met her. She was frowning, her eyes troubled. "I heard some shooting just a minute ago, Rogan," she said bluntly. "I was afraid—"

"It was in Clara's office," said Ben Rogan. "A man named Sidwell—"

He broke off, staring across Jinny's shoulders toward the Front street corner of the Plaza. A group of riders had just appeared and were dismounting in the yard in front of Borghoff's corral. Macgregor's men!

"Let's step in here for a minute," he said taking Jinny's arm.

He almost shoved her across the board walk and into the Truitt House. He thought they made it in time, before Macgregor's men had seen them. But he wasn't sure.

XVI

THIS EARLY IN THE MORNING, Will Truitt's saloon had no customers. The place was deserted. Even Will Truitt was across the street in the bank, where he had hurried after hearing the sound of gunfire.

Ben Rogan and Jinny Halstead stood just inside the double doors, Ben holding one door slightly open, looking up the street toward Borghoff's corral.

"What is it, Ben?" asked Jinny.

"Macgregor," said Ben. He turned his head and glanced at Jinny. "So I'm Ben, again."

Jinny bit her lips. The name had slipped out. She hadn't meant to use it. In calling this man Rogan she had been able to build an imaginary wall between them. A wall which she was afraid had crumbled. When or how, she wasn't sure.

He was again staring up the street and Jinny took advantage of this to look at him closely. His hair was shaggy. He hadn't shaved. The suit coat he was wearing was thin at the elbows, frayed at the cuffs. His jeans were old and his boots looked as though they had never been polished. He had a thin and boney face and was scowling, and there was nothing in his appearance to inspire confidence, yet curiously, Jinny wasn't afraid.

"Are they coming this way?" she asked quietly.

Ben shook his head. "They're out in the street, talking. Or rather listening to Macgregor talk. Ollie Farnsworth is with them."

"Ollie Farnsworth?" said Jinny. And then, "Gus Durango mentioned him back in the hills while we were waiting for you to bring the doctor. He said he had seen Ollie here in town, meeting two of Macgregor's men. I was to tell you. I didn't."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. This made more of the picture clear, a picture which was beginning to show its ugly corners. Ollie worked for Clara, and made his reports to Macgregor. Through him, Macgregor could have learned of the proposed raid on the MAC. And through him, Macgregor probably knew that Gus had been taken to Clara's home. There was no other way to explain Ollie's hurried ride from town shortly after his visit to the bank, this morning.

"At least, you're honest, Jinny," Ben muttered. "Few of the rest of us have been."

He didn't turn his head. He didn't see her reach out and almost touch his arm, and then quickly draw back.

Out in the street the group standing around Macgregor split up. Half a dozen men led by Matt Billings turned toward the road which led to the river, and to Clara Bane's. The remainder, following Arne Macgregor, started for the bank.

BEN SUCKED in a deep breath. He nodded his head. This was about what he had expected. It told him a great deal. It told him that Macgregor knew, probably from Ollie and perhaps verified by one of the captured rustlers, just what part Clara Bane had had in the raid on the MAC. It told him Macgregor expected him and Gus and Jinny to be at Clara Bane's home. It told him Macgregor wasn't

finished with them, and that after he had settled things with Clara he would pick up his fight with Jinny.

The men with Macgregor were met in front of the bank by some of those who had rushed there following the shooting of the rustler, and again there was a conference in the street, this time between Macgregor's crowd and those from the bank. Ben reported this to Jinny.

"What about the men who have gone to Clara Bane's?" asked Jinny. "What will they do?"

Her hand was on Ben's arm, now clutching it tightly. Her voice betrayed her deep concern.

"I don't know," Ben answered. "Paddy Knowles will fight. So will Howard Crandall. And maybe Van Dusen. Or it might not come to that. The men with Billings may have been sent to Clara Bane's, merely to hold us there until Macgergor has finished with Clara, here in town. In that case, nothing will happen—for a while."

Macgregor, accompanied by several others, had entered the bank. Those left outside stood watching the door. And Ben watched the door, wondering what was happening in the bank, trying to picture the meeting between Macgregor and Clara Bane, and glad that he had no part in it. He told Jinny, briefly, what had happened in town this morning, and what Clara had planned and how her plan had failed. He explained Clara's antagonism for Macgregor as she had explained it to him and was surprised at the sudden way Jinny came to Clara's defense.

"I don't blame her," said Jinny. "Was it fair? Was there anything honorable in anything Macgregor did?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps not."

"You know there wasn't" said Jinny. "She was a woman. She couldn't run a bank. That was a man's job. And I'm a woman. I can't run a ranch, according to Macgregor. So far as he's concerned, this is a man's world."

This was a crooked slant at it, but perhaps it also held a part of the truth. Certainly it did so far as Jinny herself was concerned.

WILL TRUITT, who had followed Macgregor into the bank, came outside. He talked briefly to the men waiting there and then headed for his saloon, pushed open the door, and came to an abrupt stop as he saw Jinny and Ben Rogan.

"We're just borrowing this place of yours for a few minutes, Will," Ben told him. "What's happened across the street?"

"Macgregor has placed Clara Bane under arrest," said the saloonkeeper, slowly. "Hal Wallace swore Macgregor in as a deputy after Macgregor had accused you of the murder of Jim Canby. Since Wallace isn't in town, Macgregor is extending his authority a little. He says that Clara Bane is responsible for a raid on the MAC this morning, that she was working with a band of rustlers, and that the man you killed is one of them. He's going to lock her up."

"And then?"

"And then place you and Paddy Knowles under arrest. He says that you were working with Sidwell and Clara Bane and that the shooting of Sidwell was a private quarrel."

"What about Jinny?"

"You've kidnapped her, Ben, according to Macgregor. You have lied to her about him. He's a smooth one, all right. He'll make it stick—maybe."

Ben shook his head. "How did Clara take it?"

"Not well," said the saloonkeeper. "I need a drink."

He walked to the far end of the bar and then behind it and from one of the bottles on the shelf, poured a stiff drink. He tossed it off, shuddered, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What happened?" Ben insisted.

"She stood up to him," said Will Truitt slowly. "She swore at him. She used words I've never heard a woman use. She reminded him of one night in El Paso, long ago, when he came to the place where she worked. It was pretty rotten, Ben. It wasn't easy to listen to."

"And Macgregor?" Ben asked.

"Macgregor stood looking at her, as grim as judgment day. He tossed off what she said about El Paso as a lie. He used her profanity to justify all the charges he has ever made about her. When I walked out he had just given her five minutes to gather her personal belongings

from the desk."

BEN turned back to the door, opened it a crack, and looked toward the bank. This was a bitter thing Clara was facing, too much for any person to have to face alone. She had expected to bring Macgregor to the bank on his knees, begging for a loan. Instead, he had come to arrest her, gloating over the proof of his lies, righteous as only a narrow man can be righteous when driven by the spur of his own conscience.

"Ben," whispered Jinny. "Ben, what can we do?"

"Nothing," said Ben harshly. "Nothing for Clara."

"But we've got to. If Clara was wrong, Macgregor made her wrong. She's not to blame for what she did."

"But she did what she did, Jinny."

"Because she was driven to it."

"Could you have been?"

"Yes. I could."

Ben stared through the crack of the door toward the bank. He saw the bank door open and two men come out, then Clara Bane, and behind her, Macgregor, a tall and bulky figure. He couldn't see the expression on Macgregor's face but he could imagine it. The flushed cheeks, the triumphant look in his eyes, the satisfied grin.

And Clara?

She stood motionless for a moment on the board walk in front of the bank. Tall, slender, her shoulders thrown back, her head held proudly high. She wasn't wearing her hat and the morning sun, touching her hair, brought out its glistening, copper color.

Two of the men stepped up beside her, caught her arms, and marched her up the street toward the sheriff's office. Arne Macgregor followed them. The rest of the crowd trailed along. At the sheriff's office, Clara Bane, the two man guarding her, and Macgregor, disappeared. How Macgregor would succeed in locking her up, where he would find a jail key, Ben didn't know. But in some way or other, Macgregor would have the full satisfaction of his victory. He would have it even if he had to break open the jail and supply it with a new lock.

Ben turned from the door, "Will," he said abruptly, "I want you to do something for me."

"What?" asked Will Truitt.

He had poured another drink but hadn't taken it. He was scowling at it, apparently still remembering the scene he had witnessed in the bank.

"I want you to go across the street to the jail. I want you to grab Macgregor as soon as he comes out. I want you to tell him about the paper I left with you, the one you have in your safe."

"You want me to tell him what it is?"

"Yes."

"He'll insist that I give it to him."

Ben nodded. "That's just the point, Will. And a little reluctantly, you can agree, but you can insist that he come here alone, that he doesn't let his men in on the secret of how he got the paper."

"And when he gets here, Ben?"

"We'll talk to him."

"That's all?"

"I hope so, Will. I can't promise that nothing will happen. You know that. But I think all we'll do, is talk."

Will Truitt seemed to consider this for a moment. He finally nodded his head and came around the bar and up to the door. There he paused.

"I sort of like this place of mine, Ben," he said slowly. "I'd hate it if it got messed up."

Ben grinned. He said, "Sure, Will. I know it. You'd better hurry."

Will Truitt grunted. He glanced soberly at Jinny, then pushed open the door and stepped outside.

BEN CHECKED HIS GUN. He watched Will Truitt angling toward the sheriff's office and after he had reached it, join the men waiting outside.

"Will he come?" asked Jinny.

Ben nodded.

"What's the paper?"

"It's a loan agreement, signed by Clara. The rustlers cleaned me out, Jinny. I had my choice of going back to work for wages, or taking the job Clara offered me, on the mesa. The job would have paid off in a loan, heavy enough to give me a new start. It would have saved ten years of work. Maybe more. Right now, of course, the loan agreement isn't worth the paper it's written on. But Macgregor will want

it, to help prove his charges against me. He'll come after it."

"And when he does?"

"We'll have a talk."

The men who had led Clara into the sheriff's office came back out of the street. They were followed, a moment later, by Arne Macgregor.

Will Truitt pushed forward. He caught Macgregor by the arm, drew him aside and talked to him for a moment. After this, Macgregor spoke briefly to his men, then rejoined Will Truitt, and with him, started across the Plaza toward the saloon.

Ben Rogan had watched this through the crack in the door. He turned, now, to face Jinny.

"Back of the bar with you, Jinny," he ordered. "And down on your knees. I don't want Macgregor to see you when he comes in."

Jinny nodded. She hurried behind the bar, disappeared from Ben's sight, and a moment later, spoke.

"I've found a gun back here, Ben. I just thought you ought to know."

Ben grinned. For some reason or other this released much of the tension which he had been feeling. He called, "Quiet, Jinny. They're almost here," and then stepped to the side of the door and stood close against the wall. He had drawn and lifted his gun. On the board walk outside he heard the sound of footsteps and the murmur of voices. The doors were thrust open and Arne Macgregor stepped into the saloon, followed by Will Truitt. He moved straight ahead.

"You should have told me about the paper sooner," he was grumbling. "Get it."

Ben shook his head. "Not yet, Macgregor," he said sharply. "Why rush things so much."

AT THE first sound of his voice, Macgregor had whirled to face him, his hand dropping to his holstered gun. But he didn't draw it. Color climbed into his fleshy face and stayed there. He looked at the gun which was covering him, and for an instant, didn't move. Then, slowly, his hands came up until they were shoulder high, and he glanced at Will Truitt.

"I'll not forget this, Truitt," he promised, and his voice was grim.

Will Truitt shrugged. "You haven't been hurt—yet."

He moved past Macgregor to the bar, picked up the drink which he had left there, stared at it, then set it down.

"Well, Rogan?" barked Macgregor.

"I thought we ought to talk things over," said Ben.

"What things? What is there to talk over?"

"Why did you arrest Clara?"

"That woman! You know why I arrested her. She hired the men who raided the MAC this morning?"

Ben nodded. "And who hired the men who made the raid on the Halstead ranch the day Jed Crandall was killed, the day Gus Durango was shot? Who led them?"

"That was no raid!" shouted Macgregor.

"Wasn't it?" said Ben. "What do you think Jinny will say in court? What will Gus say? Howard Crandall, whose brother was murdered? Van Dusen? Law is a wonderful thing. It covers everyone, even men named Macgregor."

Arne Macgregor pulled in a deep breath. He shook his head. "I made no raid on the mesa. You're crazy, Rogan. Crazy!"

"Perhaps, but you're under arrest, Macgregor. Jinny, come and get his gun."

Jinny stood up. Her eyes were sparkling. She came around the bar and up behind Macgregor. She reached out and drew the gun from his holster and backed quickly away.

There was a shocked and almost unbelieving look on Macgregor's face. His mouth opened several times as though to speak, but no words came from his lips. He mopped a hand over his perspiring face.

"In Clara's home," Ben continued, "there's a man who is seriously wounded, a friend of mine, and two others who work for Jinny Halstead. You sent some of your men that way. If they cause any trouble, you'll never be able to explain it in court. I want you to call them back, Macgregor. In fact, I think you'd better send all your men back to the ranch. Step to the door, call one of them over here, and give him those instructions. Tell him—"

Footsteps echoed suddenly on the board walk in front of the Truitt House. A voice

called out, "Hey, Arne. We've got to see you." And then the doors burst open and three men came in.

Ben had no more warning than that. He jerked to face these men. Macgregor's men. He saw them in the doorway against the bright morning light in the Plaza, held rigid by their surprise. He saw the arm of one of them move, saw a gun swing up, and heard the roar of its too quick explosion. And then the men were backing out, scrambling in their hurry to get away, and Macgregor was lunging after them, diving straight into them, into the confusion in the doorway, and screaming at them to shoot.

Ben could have killed Macgregor in that moment. He very nearly did. His gun was leveled at the man's broad back and his finger was tight on the trigger. But at the last instant he brought the barrel down and fired low. And then all four men were through the swinging doors and the doors had closed and he could hear them racing away.

In the brief silence which followed, Ben glanced at Jinny. Her eyes were on his face. Wide eyes. Startled. Questioning. He shook his head numbly and crossed to where she was standing. He said, "Jinny, we'd better get out of here. I'm afraid—"

He broke off, listening. From somewhere outside he could hear Macgregor shouting orders, orders to cover the rear of the saloon, to blast him out. A shot crashed through the window. Another screamed above the door.

Will Truitt had already disappeared, probably hurrying out through the back door, and now Ben and Jinny turned that way. They crossed a sun baked yard in the partial shelter of a low fence, reached Will Truitt's shed, and stepped inside.

This, Ben realized, was as far as they could safely go. In another moment, at least, Macgregor's men would be covering the rear of the saloon, and would see them if they moved. This was as far as they could go and it offered poor protection. It was one of the first places Macgregor would search after he discovered the Truitt House was empty. There was no place in it to hide

"We made it," Jinny whispered

Ben realized, abruptly, that she was standing quite close and that his arm was around her shoulders. He hadn't been conscious of it but Jinny didn't seem to mind and he left it there, even tightened it a little. He said, "Yes, we made it," and looked down at her, frowning, and wondering if she realized just what lay ahead and if there was any way to save her from what would surely happen.

XVII

IT WAS HALF DARK IN THE shed. Half dark, and the air was warm and heavy with pungent barn odors. Morning sunlight streaked a dozen thin slices of itself through chinks in the board wall, bright slices through which danced countless particles of dust. In their stalls at the far end of the shed, Will Truitt's team moved about restlessly, perhaps sensing the tension which gripped the two young people near the door, or perhaps still alarmed at the recent sound of gunfire.

It had stopped, now, and Ben could guess the reason. There had been no answering shots from the saloon. Macgregor and his men would be moving up, closing in. They would find the saloon empty and then would look here. They wouldn't miss this shed, couldn't miss it. And he and Jinny couldn't leave. Two men were crouched near the back corner of the saloon. He could see them from the shed door. Another was behind the narrow fence which ran along the border of the next lot. He had caught a glimpse of him.

"How long do we have?" asked Jinny.

Ben Rogan scowled. "Maybe five minutes. Maybe fifteen."

"That's not long, is it, Ben?"

He looked down at her then. Down at this thin, straw-haired girl who stood no higher than his chin. He had seen her eyes when they blazed with anger. Now they were misty. He had heard her voice when it cut like a knife. A moment ago it had sounded almost intimate. She should be frightened, but she didn't seem at all frightened. She was even smiling. He felt strangely moved. His arm was no longer around her shoulder but he remembered it had been, and she hadn't pushed him away.

"Five minutes?" she said. "Fifteen? It's not long, Ben. I've so many things to say

to you."

"What things?" asked Ben, scowling, staring into the yard.

"Things you probably don't want to hear. Things I probably won't say, but could."

Ben's scowl grew deeper. This was a hell of a time to fall in love with a girl but he was afraid it was happening. He wanted to reach out again and put his arm around Jinny's shoulders. He wanted to look down into her eyes, but he knew if he did he was lost. He would say things he had no business saying, that there was no time to say.

The sound of gunfire startled him. It came from some distance away, from down near the river, from the direction of Clara's. He counted the shots, two close together, then four more, then silence.

"That was at Clara's," he said under his breath, thinking of Paddy Knowles, and of Gus, helpless in his bed. Of Van Dusen, whom he still didn't understand, and of Howard Crandall who had come back to Los Prados with murder in his heart. Half a dozen men had gone down the road toward Clara's. Macgregor's men. They hadn't started anything right away, but just a moment ago, someone had started something.

And it was over. There was no more shooting.

Jinny shuddered, bit her lips. "I'd forgotten for a moment about Gus, Paddy, the others. Ben, you don't think—"

"It didn't sound like much of a fight," said Ben. "Paddy's tough. The rustlers took him by surprise but he was expecting trouble this morning. It's my guess, Jinny, that they're still holding out at Clara's."

THE BACK DOOR to the Truitt House was suddenly opened and Chino stepped into the yard. Another man followed him. The two from the corner of the saloon joined them, and for a moment these four stood in the yard, talking. What they said, Ben couldn't hear, but after a moment he saw them looking toward the shed. It was a natural thing to do. They hadn't found him in the saloon. He hadn't had time to go very far.

"Get back in one of the far stalls, Jinny," he said under his breath.

The girl didn't move from his side. She shook her head. "I've got a gun."

"Get back there."

"No."

Ben turned angrily to face her. He stared into a face as stubborn as his own.

"It was my fight to begin with," he heard her saying. "You go back to one of the far stalls."

Ben almost laughed at that. It was so ridiculous. So crazy. So hopelessly reckless. He almost laughed, and just as in the Truitt House, felt his tensions slipping away.

"Jinny," he said. "If we pull out of this. If we make it—"

But they wouldn't, of course. There wasn't a chance in the world. The four men were advancing on the shed. They had split up, spread out across the yard. And behind them, in the doorway to the Truitt House, was Arne Macgregor. He had secured another gun someplace. It was in his hand.

"Search that place from one end to the other," he shouted. "They couldn't get far. Find them."

Two of the men had now passed out of the range of Ben's vision and were moving up on either side of the shed. The remaining two, Chino and a tall, thin, stoop shouldered man, were coming up on each side of the door.

"Over here," Ben whispered to Jinny. "Against the wall."

He drew her that way, his arm again around her shoulder. He drew her to the blind side of the door and standing there, looked down at her. At her thin face, sober now in the realization of what must happen. At her lips, slightly parted. Full, warm lips that could come alive under a man's kiss. At her eyes, steady and unafraid. Steady as they looked up into his.

The door hinge creaked under the pressure of a man's hand. It swung wide. A shadow, the thick, bulky shadow of the man called Chino reached into the barn.

"Rogan!" he called. "Rogan! Are you in there?"

His voice held a tense note of excitement. There was a moment of silence, then he spoke again.

"Rogan! This is your last chance. If you're in there, come out with your hands up."

Come out and what, Ben wondered.

Come out and get shot more quickly? For that was what Macgregor must have ordered. Macgregor wouldn't want him alive to push the charges he had made in the Truitt House. He took his arm from around Jinny's shoulder. He lifted his gun. He edged forward, watching Chino's shadow.

"No answer, Ed," muttered Chino. "Come on. Call the others."

He stepped straight ahead to peer around the door. His gun was lifted, ready. And he must have caught sight of Rogan for a gasp sounded in his throat and he stiffened, and his gun exploded, echoing the shot from Rogan's gun.

Ben felt the stinging scrape of the bullet high on his arm. He lunged against the door, driving it at Chino's already sagging body. The man behind Chino shouted a hoarse and unnecessary warning to the others, ducked quickly away, and then started firing through the thin boards of the shed.

CHINO WAS DOWN, his body holding the door half open. Jinny, on her knees, sighted and fired through the hinge crack of the door. She steadied the gun, fired again. Ben reached her, pulled her away and held her down, flat on the ground. Bullets screamed above them, and not far above them. Macgregor's men were firing low. In the far end of the shed the two horses were plunging wildly against the railings of their stalls, shaking the entire building.

The firing had suddenly and unaccountably stopped. Ben could hear the low rumble of voices from somewhere in the yard. He thought he could distinguish Macgregor's among the others and he wondered what Macgregor was ordering, what new plan he could devise beyond the one of ripping this place from side to side with bullets.

In things the way they stood now, Macgregor had exactly what he wanted. An excuse to get Jinny, by accident. A chance to blame her death on the fact that she had been with Rogan.

"Jinny," he whispered. "Wait here. I'm going to see what's happening."

He got to his knees, stood up. And Jinny stood, too, gripping him tightly by the arm.

"I'm going with you," she said, stubbornly.

"No,"

"But I am."

Ben Rogan's lips tightened. He did what he had to do. Did it swiftly, and almost without thought. His gun whipped up, down, crashing against Jinny's straw sheened hair and as her body sagged he caught her and lowered her to the ground.

"Sorry, Jinny," he muttered. "I didn't want to."

He turned abruptly away, stepped to the door, stepped over Chino's body and outside, his gun leveled at the group in the yard, his eyes seeking one figure, the figure of Arne Macgregor. He saw him but didn't fire. Arne Macgregor was almost completely surrounded. He was arguing, shouting at someone, and there were many more men in the yard than had come to town with him. Ben saw Doc Ulrich, Abe Soloman, who ran the store, Will Truitt, Frank Price and others who lived and worked in Los Prados. It seemed to be Ulrich with whom Macgregor was arguing. And the doctor was armed, as were the others.

For a moment, no one noticed him there in the door, and then Will Truitt saw him and said something to the others, and came toward him, running.

"How's Jinny?" Will was shouting. "She's not—"

Ben slowly lowered his gun. He didn't know how it had happened but he realized, vaguely, that the men of Los Prados had taken a hand, that the men who lived here had put an end to Macgregor's attack.

Will Truitt reached him, brushed past him, and entered the shed. He reappeared a moment later with Jinny in his arms. He shouted for Doc Ulrich and Doc Ulrich hurried to meet him.

"Put her down," said the doctor.

Will lowered the girl to the ground and knelt beside her. Others crowded around, Ben with them. He looked anxiously into Jinny's face, saw her lips move, saw her eyes blink open.

"I hit her," said Ben. "I thought—"

He didn't finish the sentence. He looked away. Macgregor and his men were moving off, rounding the corner of the saloon.

"You what!" gasped Doc Ulrich.

"I hit her," said Ben.

He mopped a hand over his face and watched Macgregor's men out of sight.

IN THE TRUITT HOUSE, a few minutes later, Ben learned what had happened. Will Truitt, after escaping through the rear door of the saloon after Macgregor's men had opened fire, had circled back to the street and run into Doc Ulrich. Together, he and the doctor had made a hurried circle of the Plaza, calling on every man they could find to join them in an attempt to stop the fight. Fifteen or twenty strong, they had closed in on Macgregor just as Macgregor's men had located Ben and Jinny.

"We told him there was a law in this county to settle things," said Will Truitt, grimly. "We told him he could make whatever charges he wanted to in court. He didn't like it much but he had to take it.

"There was some shooting down near Clara's," said Ben.

"One of Macgregor's men was killed. Young Crandall got him. He says the man was one of the two fellows who shot his brother. The men down there didn't start anything. They were merely guarding the house. When the firing in town started, they turned back. From the door of the house Young Crandall recognized one of them, shouted at him, and when he turned, fired."

Ben nodded. He could picture just what happened, the blazing look in Howard Crandall's eyes as he had called to the man, the satisfaction he must have felt when the man dropped. Or would he have felt any real satisfaction? Maybe his stomach was kicking up as Ben's was kicking up now. Maybe he felt sick.

"We've never had much organization in this town," Will Truitt continued. "We've never needed it. Just a sheriff and judge. But for a while, I reckon, we'll have more. A committee to see that the sheriff and judge do what they're supposed to."

Abe Soloman came in a few minutes later to report that Macgregor and his men had left town. "Macgregor said he was perfectly willing to let the court decide things," he mentioned. "He said he'd ride in tomorrow with all the proof he needed against Clara and Ben Rogan."

This didn't sound right. Ben shook his head, scowling. He stepped outside and there met Doc Ulrich, who had just come back from walking Jinny to Clara's. While there, he had taken a look at Gus.

"Gus will pull through," he proimsed. "He's really one tough guy. The person I'm worried about is you."

"Me?" said Ben.

The doctor chuckled. "When I left Jinny she was feeling the bump on her head and promising to get even with you the minute she saw you. And hovering over her like a mother hen was this Van Dusen. Who is her, anyhow?"

"A man who works for her," Ben muttered.

He crossed the street to the bank, pushed open the door, crossed to Clara's offce and entered it. Ollie Farnsworth sat at Clara's desk, making marks on a piece of paper. He looked up when Ben came in. His face was pale, haggard.

"Ollie,"said Ben. "You warned me about Van Dusen. Why?"

"Just something I heard once."

"What was it?"

"Belle Waverley often came in here with bits of gossip for Clara. Sometimes I overheard what was said. One morning Belle told Clara that Van Dusen had been with one of her girls the night before. He had said Jinny didn't have a chance against Macgregor but that he was going to stick with her, persuade her finally to sell, and get a good chunk of the money as his cut. I thought maybe he was working with Macgregor, but he wasn't. He was on his own."

Ben considered this for a moment, then shrugged. He stared thoughtfully at Ollie. "But you worked with Macgregor."

Ollie nodded.

"Why?"

"I had to."

"Why?"

The man brushed his hands over his face. "Because I love her," he said, almost under his breath. "I love her, and her bitterness toward Macgregor was destroying her. What happened had to happen. There was no other way to save her, Ben."

Ben didn't get it. He stood quietly, waiting.

"There could be no happiness for her here in this town which she hates, and which hates her," Ollie continued. "But she can find happiness now. She has lost.

She will have to leave. Go away. She can leave her bitterness and hate behind her. I had to do what I did, Ben, because I love her."

Here was the naked soul of a man. A little man with his own peculiar type of courage. And the cost of what he had done had been heavy. It was written in the deep, sagging lines of his face, in the hollow stoop of his shoulders.

Ben turned and left the office. He stood for a moment in the full warm glare of the morning sun, not yet high. The Plaza was quiet. Here and there he could see moving figures. The sharp, tense excitement of an hour ago was gone. Jinny, Gus, Howard Crandall and Van Dusen were at Clara's where no danger threatened them. Macgregor and his riders were on the way back to the MAC, where Macgregor would make whatever new plan he could dream up, and there were few possibilities. Three men were dead. Trumbo. Pete Sidwell, and the one Crandall had shot. And in the Los Prados jail, Clara faced the bitterness of defeat.

XVIII

FOR HALF A DOLLAR, A MAN could get a haircut and a shave at Gonzales' barber shop, on the Plaza just beyond the feed store. For twenty-five cents he could have a bath in the old iron tub in the back room. Ben Rogan ordered the works. He relaxed in the chair while Pedro Gonzales sheared his hair and then steamed and shaved his face. After this he entered the back room, pulled off his clothing, and climbed into the tub. There he lathered his body, and then just soaked. When the water had cooled quite a bit he got out, toweled himself dry, half dressed, and then sprawled out on the bunk in the room for a cigaret.

He didn't mean to sleep. He didn't know that he had until someone shook him roughly by the shoulder and woke him and he sat, still groggy, a little confused.

"You know, if you want a room you could rent one at the hotel," said Doc Ulrich. "Or you could have a bed free at Clara's. A better bed than this."

Ben rubbed his eyes. He glanced at the lamp on the table, surprised that it was burning. "What time is it?" he demanded.

"Nine o'clock. Maybe a little after."

"What happened to the day?"

"It went the way of all days, after a rough start," Doc Ulrich chuckled. "I suppose you could pound that pillow for a long time but Pedro's got to go home. Did you ever see his wife?

"No."

"Well, she's big as a mountain, and just as strong, and she doesn't like it when Pedro doesn't come home. He's the only barber in town. We can't risk what might happen to him if you keep him here any longer."

"That is not true, *Senor,*" said Pedro from the doorway. "In my own home I am the *clavo.*"

"The heavy stick," grinned Ulrich. "But he isn't. Come on, Ben."

"Gus?" asked Ben, getting to his feet.

"Quit worrying about him."

"And Jinny? She—"

The doctor was still grinning. "You can worry about her, all right. She thinks you've been dodging her. Every minute you stay away she gets a little madder."

"Van Dusen's there, isn't he," Ben muttered.

"Nope. He pulled out this afternoon. Jinny sent him on his way. I don't think she liked what he had on his mind. I think she has other interests."

Ben could feel himself flushing. He tried to cover this up with a scowl. Reaching for his gun belt he strapped it around his waist, then thoughtfully examined his gun.

"You won't need that any more," said Ulrich. "At least in the same way as you have for the past week."

"No word from Macgregor?"

"None since he left town. And when he rides in tomorrow, he faces arrest. Everyone around here has heard Jinny's story of what happened on the mesa. Howard Crandall's story. What Gus had to say. Macgregor's row with Clara is something else, but so far as the mesa is concerned, he's up the creek without a paddle."

THEY MOVED through the barber shop and stepped outside, out into the cool, clear air of the early night. A soft wind drifted down from the Mescaleros. The stars were bright in a cloudless sky. Here and there around the Plaza, lights cut into the square from the saloons.

the store, the hotel and the stage office. There was a lamp also sending its light through the front window of Belle Waverley's, near the seldom used front door. The back entrance, as always, was dark.

There were probably people in the Plaza park. Couples on the benches in the deep, purple shadows. This was a night for it. A warm, quiet, friendly night.

"Will Truitt wants to see you before you head for Clara's" mentioned Doc Ulrich.

"Why?" asked Ben.

"I don't know. He just said to tell you that."

Ben shrugged his shoulders, and with Doc Ulrich, moved toward the Truitt House. They stepped inside. The place wasn't crowded. Two poker games were going and several men stood at the bar, talking to Will, who left them when Ben and Doc Ulrich entered.

"A drink, Ben?" asked Will Truitt. "Just one more on the house?"

"Not on a stomach as empty as mine," said Ben.

"Pour it for me," suggested the doctor.

Will poured the drink and Doc Ulrich took it in a quick gulp, then slapped Ben on the shoulder and said, "Luck, Ben. I hope you can duck." And grinning broadly, turned to the door.

"What did he mean by that?" asked Will Truitt.

Ben shrugged his shoulders.

The saloonkeeper leaned toward him, across the bar. He spoke in a low voice. "Clara's gone."

"Gone?" said Ben, startled. "What do you mean?"

"Just that, Ben. She escaped from jail about an hour ago. Ollie went with her. I helped them—some."

Ben took a deep breath. He stared at the short, stocky, dark haired man who faced him across the bar. Will's eyes were steady. A smile touched his lips, then was gone.

"Tell me about it," said Ben.

"What is there to tell, beyond that?" asked Will slowly. "You know what was ahead for Clara. Macgregor could have proven she was back of the raid on his ranch and that the same men ran off your horses. She was guilty. Guilty as hell. But it's Macgregor who was responsible. He didn't give her a chance to lead a decent life. He never let up on her. He drove her to what she did. Clara fought back in the only way she could."

Ben said nothing to this. He could see it just as Will did.

"What about the bank?" he asked after a moment.

"We'll reorganize it, set aside Clara's interest in it to cover the claims against her. Yours and Macgregors and any others. What is left I'll get to her someday. She and Ollie didn't take much with them. I saw to that."

"Where will they go?"

"I don't know, Ben. And perhaps they won't get along. Ollie loves her but they're as different as night and day. Or maybe away from here they won't be so different. Maybe someday we'll hear of Clara again in some dive in El Paso, but I don't think so. And I'm not concerned about Ollie's wife. She made Ollie miserable for years. She had this coming."

"I'll take that drink you offered," said Ben. "Just a light one."

Will Truitt set two glasses on the bar, poured two drinks. He lifted one and Ben reached for the other.

"To Clara?" Will asked.

Ben nodded soberly. "To Clara."

HE LEFT the saloon right after that and cut across the Plaza, passing close to the jail, still thinking about what Will Truitt had told him. Somewhere under this night sky, two people were riding. They would be riding silently, he imagined. Not talking much. Ollie would be excited. Excited at the thought of the woman at his side, at the new freedom that was his, at the new life ahead. And Clara? It was hard to know about Clara. The bitterness of the past years would still be in her, and perhaps had become so much a part of her she could never escape it. But she had at least escaped the retribution a stern law would have demanded, a law which didn't take into account a person's motives or the driving power of slander.

Beyond the Plaza and on the street which led to the river, Ben slowed down and put the thought of Clara from his mind. Jinny was waiting for him. Jinny, who had called him Rogan and ordered him from the mesa, and who had refused

to fight Macgregor but in the shed behind the Truitt House, had stood at his side, unwilling to let him walk out alone to face Macgregor's men. Jinny, with a bump on her head which he hadn't explained to her, but which she probably understood. Jinny, who stood no higher than his chin, but whose courage couldn't be measured by her size.

He was grinning as he moved down the street and came within sight of Clara's, grinning as he reached the gate. He felt the first touch of a warm excitement, a sudden driving eagerness to get to the house. And then abruptly, all that was wiped out. Every bit of it. His grin vanished. A cold chill raced over his body. His muscles tightened. From across the street he had heard a voice speak his name. He heard it again.

"Rogan!"

He stood where he was. Motionless. Not daring to turn, yet knowing that he had to turn. His ears were strained to catch some other sound, the sound of a footstep in the sand of the street, something to give him a more definite notion of where Macgregor was standing than that half whispered name from the darkness. For it was Macgregor across the road. He knew that as surely as he had ever known anything.

He should have anticipated something like this. He knew that, now. Macgregor had won his fight with Clara, but he had lost to Jinny. He had lost the mesa. He had lost even more. His standing in this valley, his place of leadership, his dominance. Confronted with Jinny's story of his raid on the mesa and the evidence of her men, he had no defense. He was finished. He had lost as much as Clara but would have his measure of revenge. That, at least.

Ben could feel the cold sweep of the night air against the back of his neck, moist with perspiration. He had been stooping over to open the gate when he had heard Macgregor's voice. He was still slightly stooped. He could reach his gun, draw it as he turned, but until Macgregor fired he wouldn't know where the man was standing. He might see him. There was that possibility but it was too slight to be counted on. Speed with a gun wouldn't count, now. Macgregor would get the first shot. He could be sure of that. And Macgregor wouldn't miss.

"I've been waiting here a long time, Rogan," said the voice somewhere behind him. "Turn around—or take it in the back. I'd rather you turned around. It would look better for me—when they pick you up."

STILL LSTENING intently, Ben heard the faint, scuffling sound of a footstep. The voice had sounded almost directly at his back, but after speaking, Macgregor had moved a little to one side. The river side.

And he wouldn't speak again. There would be no more talking.

He had to turn around.

Turn around and grab for his gun. That was all he could do. Or turn around and dive at Macgregor. Straight at him. Low. It was a trick that might work if Macgregor wasn't too close. It was all he could think of. His muscles had bunched and now, suddenly, he moved in a desperate, swinging dive, turning, scraping a hand for his gun, lunging awkwardly at the place where he thought Macgregor was standing.

And he had been right about that, at least. He saw the man's thick shadow. He saw the flame from his gun. He felt the sting of a bullet searing the flesh of his shoulder and then he was on the ground, lifting his gun, firing at the bulky figure half across the narrow street. A figure that swayed forward and then dropped, and then lay motionless, almost hidden against the darkness of the earth.

The lights in Clara's house had gone out, but Ben didn't know that. Paddy Knowles and Howard Crandall had stepped outside and were crouching close to the porch, their eyes probing the shadows, their guns ready. Jinny stood in the doorway and he heard her voice. Anxious. Frightened.

"Ben! Ben! Where are you?"

"Stay back," Ben called. "Stay where you are."

He moved, got to his knees, still watching Macgregor's figure. Nothing happened. He stood up, and after a moment's hesitation, moved forward. Paddy Knowles came up through the darkness and joined him, and then Young Crandall. Paddy stooped over the figure on the ground, and

after a moment, straightened.

"Macgregor," he said heavily. "He'll trouble us no more, Ben."

"No more," said Ben, flatly.

He turned toward the house, feeling shaky and aware of the stinging pain across his shoulder where Macgregor's bullet had touched him, realizing that what Paddy had said was true but wishing, at the same time, that the end could have come some other way. He didn't see Jinny coming to meet him but suddenly she was there, right in front of him, a slender figure blocking his way, looking anxiously into his face.

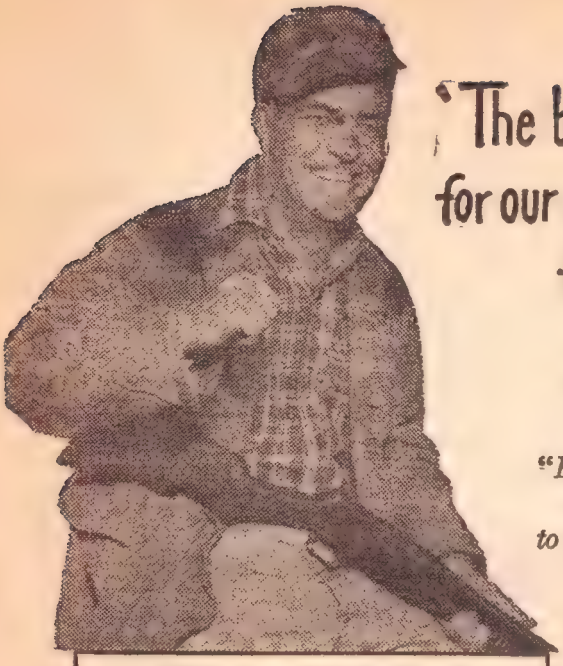
She was in front of him, and then in his arms, or perhaps he was in hers, for she was clutching him almost fiercely and whispering his name over and over.

"Hey," said Ben, and his voice wasn't very steady. "You're supposed to hit me, or something."

"I'll do that, too," said Jinny. "But not now. Right now I just want to stay like this."

It was a good idea, Ben thought. There was something awfully nice about holding Jinny in his arms and feeling the strength of her body against his. He found her lips. Warm lips, soft, sweet. A woman's lips. And he stood there holding her, or perhaps being held. He didn't know which and didn't care. Either way, it was what he wanted.

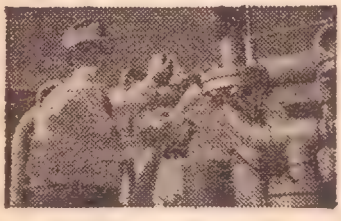
AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY



"The bonds Lila and I bought for our country's defense helped us to own our own home!"

HOW U. S. SAVINGS BONDS PAID OFF FOR SELDEN AND LILA ROBINSON OF DENVER, COLORADO

"Bond saving enabled me to become a home owner," says Selden Robinson, "then to buy a better house, and to replace our old car with a new one."



"I enrolled in the Payroll Savings Plan before the war at the Stearns-Roger Manufacturing Co. I was buying two $18.75 bonds a month toward a dream home Lila and I had planned."

"The $4,000 we've saved paid $2,800 on our first home, paid the difference when we traded this house for a new brick one, and paid $500 on our car. Bonds will send our girls to college, too!"

The Robinsons' story can be your story, too!

Your dream can come true, just as the Robinsons' did. *Start now!* It's easy! Just take these three simple steps:

1. Put saving first before you spend a penny of your income.

2. Decide to save a regular amount *systematically*. Even a small sum saved this way becomes large amazingly soon!

3. Start saving automatically by signing up *today* in the Payroll Savings Plan where you work or the Bond-A-Month Plan where you bank.

Your savings will grow rapidly. And you'll be providing security not only for yourself, your family, and the free way of life that's so important to us all.

FOR YOUR SECURITY, AND YOUR COUNTRY'S TOO, *SAVE NOW*—
THROUGH REGULAR PURCHASE OF U. S. SAVINGS BONDS!

Your government does not pay for this advertisement. It is donated by this publication and Foote, Cone & Belding in cooperation with the Advertising Council and the Magazine Publishers of America.

PAY-GUN *from* ABILENE

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

PAY-GUN from ABILENE

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Star-toter Hollister's rep was tall and handsome. 'Tis said he dehorned Abilene and Salt Center . . . that he was foaled by the Devil and cut his teeth on a hogleg barrel. But down on the rim of the muddy Cimarron, in the town of Conestoga Crossing, last of the untamed outlaw burgs, hard-case gunnies were bettin' the lawdog would be kickin' Boothill dirt by sundown . . . that is, if he ever dared to show up.

APPROACHING THE RIVER trestle and the cowtown siding beyond it, the hog-head of the funnel-stacked locomotive whistled for brakes. In the first car behind the tender, Gil Hollister was rocked off the mound of reasty hay he was sleeping on, by the jerky reduction of speed.

He got to his feet, a rangy, unshaven man in his early 30's who wore the shabby Stetson, waist overalls and run-down cowboots of a saddle tramp who had frayed out his string. The back of his neck ached under the thick mat of tawny hair, where a Colt's butt had rubbed him through the warbag he had used for a pillow.

Hollister had boarded this cow train—running empty from Abilene to some shipping point in Colorado—at dawn. Now the cerise glare of a deep-westered sun told him he had slept out this day's travel. It might be the last leisure he would ever know.

Squeezing his eyes against the glare, Hollister peered through the open slats of the cattle car to get his bearings from the wheeling west-Kansas prairie. The train was now rumbling over the yellow waters of a river which mid-summer drought had reduced to a trickle. Its wide, sloping flanks of sun-checked mud gave off an earthy stench compounded of fish rotting in evaporating pools, dank willowbrake, and the sewage of a tannery which outposted a settlement.

"The Cimarron," Hollister thought, studying the battlemented false fronts of a sizeable trail town silhouetted against the south skyline, its back-lot fences recoiling from the river's verge. That would be Conestoga Crossing, last of the wild towns fed by the Texas longhorn traffic of the Chisholm Trail.

The loco's drivers pounded over switch frogs up ahead as the trail shunted onto a siding to clear the main line for the fast Abilene Express, overhauling them from the east.

Hollister picked up his sacked saddle and the warbag and lugged them to mid-car, waiting for the train to stop before deciding which door to open. He had heard of the treatment brakemen gave blind-baggage passengers on these Santa Fe branch lines and he had no intention of tangling with one of the breed.

The train grated to a halt with a sigh of steam and a jolt of drawbars, alongside the platform of a hay-and-grain warehouse. Hollister trundled the near open door and tossed his gear to the splintered planking of the wagon platform.

He was taking the long jump from car floor to platform when he saw the shadow of a brakeman standing on the catwalk directly above him.

"Stand where you are, bo, or I'll brain ye."

HOLLISTER TURNED, looking up at the glowering Irish visage of the trainman. The blue-jumpered giant on the car roof had his big hickory brake stick poised menacingly and there was a wicked anticipation in the malevolent, snag-toothed grin he wore.

The railroader was tough and dangerous and Hollister knew what was coming. The brakemen on these jerkwater lines exacted a toll from such tramps as they found riding the rods and if they didn't get it a 'bo could expect a cracked skull.

It would be easy to run for it, but that would start a chase and a chase would attract attention, which was the last thing Gil Hollister wanted. He resigned himself to the inevitable and stood waiting, his face showing neither hostility nor

concern over the consequences of what lay ahead as he watched the burly crewman swarm down the iron ladder and jump to the platform, one hairy fist clenching the hardwood stick as he stalked forward.

"Saddle tramp, hey?" commented the railroader, appraising this hobo. Big, solid of muscle, but with cheek hollows hinting of a too-long interval since this man had last gotten on the outside of a square meal. From the warped brim of his Stetson to the run-down nubs of spike heels on his Justin boots, this sadde bum advertised his beat-out luck.

"I hopped your rattler at Abilene," Hollister said in a dead voice. "What's your price?"

The brakeman's grin widened. This bum carried no gun at his hip, therefore this would be an easy touch.

"A dollar," he said, and then his expression altered craftily. "But you don't want to get off here, 'bo. Know what this town is?"

Hollister reached for the Durham sack in the pocket of his faded shirt, found it empty and tossed it aside. He was thoroughly alert now, keeping his full attention on the brakie's club.

Getting no answer, the railroader went on, "It's Conestoga, my friend, the toughest town a saddle bum could get stranded in. The marshal keeps his winter woodpile at ten cords and he depends on Santy Fee bums to do his choppin'. Hanker to cut wood for sixty days on calaboose stop and no tobacco allowed, 'bo?"

Hollister appeared to be turning this dire warning over in his head as he fumbled in a pocket of his saddle-slick levis and produced a thin roll of bills and a few bits of small change.

"You don't savvy yet?" the brakeman persisted. "This town is dynamite for your breed, feller. The jail is stuffy as the grates of hell this time o' year. Better think it over. For six bits extry, say, I'd let you ride on to La Junta."

Hollister extended a palm holding two four-bit pieces.

"Would I be any better off in La Junta?" he drawled. "You Santa Fe buckos collect a rake-off for ever' able-bodied

hunk of slave labor you turn over to the law, don't you?"

The brakeman plucked the silver from Hollister's hand and eyed the saddle bum with a calculating intensity, as if wondering if he had set his tariff high enough in this instance.

"Listen, 'bo," the railroader wheedled. "You look like an hombre who might pay for a friendly favor. You ever heard of a marshal name of Gil Hollister?"

The saddle tramp was stooping to shoulder his two sacks.

"The same star-toter who dehorned Abilene an' Salt Center a few years back?"

The railroader spat a gobbet of tobacco juice against the side of the stock car and nodded.

"The same. Hell on wheels, this Hollister. Foaled by the devil and cut his teeth on a six-gun bar'l. You wouldn't hone to tangle with Gil Hollister, now, would ye, 'bo?"

The saddle tramp shifted his load, meeting the flat strike of the brakeman's beadbright eyes.

"Inferrin' I'm on the dodge?" he asked. "Why should I run afoul of this marshal?"

THE BRAKEMAN, seeing that he had suffiicently impressed his customer, played his ace. "My friend, Gil Hollister is the new marshal of this burg you're fixin to get stranded in. I told you Conestoga is hell on saddle tramps like you."

The rangy saddle bum turned on his heel. "I'll take my chances with Senor Hollister," he said. "You'll not bleed another nickel out of my jeans, mister."

The brakeman's scarred countenance took on a flush of temper. Remembering the greenbacks he had seen this tramp stuff in his pocket, the railroader glanced quickly up and down the flanks of the train, and then lashed out at Hollister's retreating head with his brake club.

The brakeman's shadow on the platform telegraphed his treachery to the saddle bum. Hollister's sideward twist took the down-clubbing wooden bludgeon on his warsack, and he flung his load from his as he spun, to catch the brakeman completely off balance and wide open for a Sunday punch.

Hollister's following uppercut carried all the power of his rawhide frame behind it, connecting with the underside of the brakie's jaw and driving him in a backward arching sprawl to measure his length heavily on the splintered pine planking.

Rubbing his skinned knuckle briefly along a pantleg, Hollister searched the limp figure for signs of fight and saw none. Finally he reached down, picked up the Irishman by the slack of his belt and and pitched him into the cattle car as he would a sack of grain.

Then, the gleeful shine of battle simmering down under the metallic surfaces of his eyes, Hollister picked up his gear and stepped into the cool dark of the warehouse, following an alley of high-piled feed sacks to reach an opposite exit which overlooked Conestoga.

Where this side street entered the town's principal thoroughfare, Hollister discerned a ramshackle two-story structure with a signboard hanging by rusty wire fastenings from its original position on the ridge of the roof. Time-faded letters on the board identified the buildings as the Chisholm Trail's End Hotel.

That wind-blown signboard, Hollister knew, hinted at the story behind the sinister rep of this town on the muddy Cimarron. In the 'fifties it had been a trading post catering to overland wagon trains who forded the river here; during the turbulent post-war 'sixties it was still too far west to see the drovers hazing their millions of longhorns up from Texas. But with the extension of the railroad to Conestoga Crossing, the town had bloomed as a shipping center at the northwestern end of the fabulous trail of hoofs and horns bearing Jesse Chisholm's name.

This was '83, and the heyday of the big Texas trail drives was over. But the residue of that wild epoch lingered yet in this lawless town sitting athwart two frontier states. Its notoriety had spread along the dim traces of the owlhoot telegraph until it had become known as a refuge for the lawless legion of men who lurked below the nearby border of the Indian Nations, and beyond the river barriers of the Red and the Brazos and the Nueces and on to the Mexican malpais across the Rio Grande.

Until this dusk of a July day, Cones-

toga Crossing had not known Hollister's shadow; but as he trudged downstreet toward the Trail's End Hotel he knew it was inevitable that his stormy destiny should have led him to the last untamed outlaw town; and there seemed to be a sort of prescience about the name of this hotel where he now entered, knowing the Trail's End would be his living quarters until such time as Conestoga Crossing knew him no more.

II

THE WOOLY-HEADED NEGRO clerk shoved an indelible pencil and the dogeared hotel ledger at Hollister as he dumped his saddle and warbag on the crude deal counter.

"I'll sign up later," Hollister said meagerly, tossing the colored man a quarter. "Hold my baggage until I call for it."

The clerk said, "Rooms is a dollar a day, baths two bits extry. Ifn I ain't yere when you git back, suh, take the key to Numbuh Seben an' jot yo' monicker in de book. I figger to be down at de station when de express train pulls in from Abilene at seben-ten."

Hollister selected a cigar from a box on the counter, paid for it and lighted up.

"Since when did the Abilene Express stop at any jerkwater town this side of Denver, son?"

A white-toothed grin broke the shiny licorice face of the hotel clerk. He had news of deep civic import to divulge.

"She's a-stoppin' dis evenin' shore, Mistuh. Our new marshal gwine show up. Reckon de whole town be on han' to size him up, yassah. De bettin' gemmun, dey already takin' wagers how long dis Gilbert Hollistuh last in Conestoga. Las' marshal, he win' up in Boothill inside ob fo' weeks."

Hollister glanced at the flyspeckled clock over the lobby door and saw that it was an hour till train time and the event which seemed to have gripped the imagination of this cowtown. A new marshal was hardly a novelty in Conestoga, where the star changed hands with disturbing frequency, either by resignation or via the knife or bullet. But Gil Hollister . . .

Leaving the Trail's End, Hollister sauntered to the corner of Stateline, Conestoga's main street, and raked the double phalanx of false fronted buildings in search of a restaurant.

An imaginary line ran down the exact center of this street, the 102nd meridian of west longitude linking the poles of the globe and dividing the frontier prairie's westward lifting slope between Kansas and Colorado. But that intangible, unseen political fence had put its knife-slice division down the middle of Conestoga's principal thoroughfare, with a result which even the most undiscerning stranger could not miss.

Because his hide might depend on how carefully he sized up a town where he aimed to hang his John B. for an indefinite stay, Gil Hollister took thorough note of the state line's impact on this place. He sensed that the imaginary boundary was as formidable as if Conestoga's eastern and western halves had been divided by a towering wall of granite.

Opposite him, on the Kansas side of Stateline Street, respectability had put its stamp on the buildings. The Cowman's Mercantile, the New Mode Millinery Shoppe. The Stockman's Bank, Bella Union Hotel, Pettigrew's Grocery, the Prairie Pride Furniture Outfitters (Coroner's Office in Back), the Sunflower Restaurant Where Gourmets Dine. Beyond, on streets lined with shade trees as far as the river, were the gingerbread Victorian homes of the town's more sedate populace.

But on the Colorado side where Hollister now stood, the town presented a less civilized aspect. In contrast to the brick fronts across the street, the west side buildings were shabby.

For two solid blocks in either direction from the railroad, honkytonks and saloons stood shoulder by shoulder, presenting their unbroken phalanx of evil to defy the refinement sixty feet across the street. The Kickapoo Saloon & Casino, the Texas Star Gambling Hall, Ace of Hearts Dance Hall, Tommy Rineback's Silver Palace Bar, the Trail's End Hotel, Drovers' Cafe, Johansen's Barber Shop.

IT WAS A PATTERN Hollister had seen elsewhere, this sharp demarcation between vulgarity and respectability; but never so evident as in Conestoga, a town owing allegiance to two states, its social

aspects so incompatible, its politics so warped by the cleaveage of this central street. It was as if Stateline was a firebreak, hewn out of the yellow prairie earth to halt the spread of sin which spawned on the Colorado side, the evil which had given Conestoga Crossing its sinister reputation wherever desperados or lawmen gathered . . .

Turning south, Hollister kept to the spur-scuffed sidewalk in the deep shade of the Colorado-side buildings. Across the street in Kansas was the big Sunflower Restaurant, obviously the town's best; but Hollister elected to have supper in the tawdry Drover's Cafe.

Reaching the Drover's, he sized up the brands on the cowponies standing hipshot and three-footed at the rack, recognizing several brands belonging to big Texas outfits he had heard of. Their cattle, no doubt, were the ones he heard bawling in the whitewashed stockpens on the outskirts of town.

Hollister climbed the steps into the deeper shadow of the cafe's awninged porch, sized up by the loafers lining the benches there, and sizing them up in return.

"My own mother wouldn't know me with these whiskers and in these shoddy duds," he thought, and gained some measure of comfort from that, for he had recognized at least three of the flint-eyed loafers on this porch. Gunhawks out of the past.

He passed the tied-back screen doors and stepped into the eating establishment, his nostrils faintly revolted by the stench of deep-fat frying grease and garlic and stale coffee emanating from the kitchen out back. Seating himself at a counter stool he stared at his reflection in the blistered mirror backing the pastry cabinet and grimaced wryly. He looked uncouth enough to be in his element here on the hell-bent west side.

While he was waiting for the slatternly half-breed waitress to fill his order he let his big shape relax while he nursed the cigar's acrid flavor on his tongue.

A party of Texans, to judge from the border twang of their voices, were swigging coffee from thick china cups at a table alongside the street window. Scraps of their talk drifted to the saddle bum at the counter:

"Last resort, I'd say, a fleabit town like Conestoga callin' in a man of this Hollister's caliber. What difference will his rep make when he gits here? The man's hide won't shed a .45 slug."

"He run the hard cases out o' Abilene an' Salt Center, didn't he? Those weren't Sunday Schools, not in them days."

Sipping at his lukewarm onion soup, the man at the counter cocked an attentive ear for the Texans' comments behind him.

"I thought Gil Hollister hung up his guns when he finished tamin' Prairie Junction in '79. Feller I knew on the X I T claimed he worked one winter, two year back, for Hollister. Claimed Hollister had himself a small-tally spread in Wyomin'."

The first speaker's slurring nasal voice made answer: "True enough. Way I heard it, Hollister knew town tamers die young, so he quit while he was ahead of the game. What good is a rep when you're six foot under countin' tumbleweed roots?"

THE remote whoom of a train's whistle cut across the roofs of Conestoga by the time Hollister was cleaning up his wedge of dried apricot pie. As if the approaching train was a signal, the Drover's Cafe resounded to a scraping of chair legs and a general exodus toward the door.

"Well, you rannihans, here's your chance to see the great man in person. He won't be here when we come up the trail a year from now—"

"You think he'll work the kinks out o' this town in a year, Henderson?"

"Hell, I mean we'll be shootin' holes in his boothill headboard ridin' in . . ."

Hollister paid for his meal and reached for the saucer of toothpicks.

"Little excitement in town this evenin'?" he asked the waitress.

The girl waved flies away from her unwholesome cheeks.

"You ain't heard, cowboy? The city fathers have imported a Johnny Law to whittle the rough edges off o' this burg. Gil Hollister, the marshal who tamed Abilene and them other wild places back along the Santy Fee. They're expectin' him on this train you hear crossin' the Cimarron bridge."

Hollister stepped out into the blue dusk,

relighting his stub of cigar, and joined the flow of traffic toward the maroon and olive painted Santa Fe depot. A sizeable crowd had gathered under the wooden-awninged porches of the saloons bracketing the railroad on the Colorado side of town, a motley off-scouring of Conestoga's rougher half—white-aproned bartenders, gamblers in black steelpen coats, painted jezebels from the red-light bagnios on the next street paralleling Stateline to the west, cowboys up from Texas, blanketed Indians.

Because the Kansas side of the street included the railroad station and the crowd was scantier there, Hollister sauntered in that direction as the balloon-stacked engine of the crack Abilene Express came in view from the direction of the Cimarron River trestle.

Halting alongside a waiting baggage truck, Hollister put his eye on the little knot of men standing by themselves on the cinder apron of the right of way. He judged from their fustian coats and beaver tophats that they were men of influence in this town; from their tense air of expectancy he labeled them as a reception committee on hand to welcome their new marshal.

The Abilene Express snorted past the group of men, the suction of its passage whipping their frock coats, clouds of steam momentarily obscuring them from Hollister's view. The engine grated to a halt out of sight behind the corner of the Kickapoo Saloon & Casino opposite the station, the panting of its boiler sounding somehow disdainful, as if the crack passenger felt humiliation in being flagged down at this jerkwater prairie town.

There was an electric tension in the air. Across the street, under the gallery awning of the Kickapoo, men who had reason to avoid meeting a new marshal stood in a rapt tableau, sullen or scornfully amused according to their individual natures. The focal point of Conestoga's attention was turned on the train's conductor as he alighted from one of the coaches and set a stool in place under the platform steps.

HOLLISTER'S EYES took on a sharp and glinting interest as he searched the waiting, watching ranks of men lining the west side of the street. A tatter of steam from the hidden locomotive caught his eye, directing his gaze to the row of upper-story windows on the yellow-painted facade of the Kickapoo.

He saw the faded curtains of the third window from the left stir slightly, although there was no wind; and Hollister at once concentrated his attention to that opened window, and thus his eyes alone caught the brief glint of gunmetal as a double-barreled rifle muzzle rested for a brief interval on the sash, held by someone invisible behind the swaying curtains.

At this distance he could not be sure, and the gun was at once withdrawn, like the head of a reptile poking out of a hole; but he carried the impression that it was an over-and-under rifle, the lower barrel bored for birdshot shells.

"It could very well be Buckshot Jim Ames," Hollister thought, and made his decision to find out for certain, and soon.

He turned his glance back toward the stopped express in time to see the conductor handing down a young woman wearing an aigrette hat and a gray traveling suit. One of the top-hatted men in the group alongside the tracks stood waiting for her, and Hollister saw them embrace. Then a negro roustabout appeared, tipping his cap to the girl, and took a bandbox and a carpetbag from the railroad porter.

The conductor put his stepping stool back aboard and reached for his watch, glancing at it as he raised an arm to signal the engineer to get highballing.

As the Abilene Express snorted into motion, Hollister saw a stir sweep the ranks of waiting men on the Kickapoo Saloon steps, a stir which was repeated among the town's citizens who had been waiting on the station platform.

"Hollister wasn't aboard?" a voice spoke from the group of distinguished citizens standing around the girl who had alighted from the coach. "Do you suppose he missed connections? His wire said he was arriving today—"

The saddle tramp leaning against the baggage truck a few yards away heard the girl's reply above the ebbing rumble of the departing express. "The conductor said I was the only reason he had for stopping at Conestoga. So I guess that means your hired butcher lost his nerve.

Dad."

The tall, portly man in the copper-colored suit who had greeted the girl so affectionately said in an abashed voice, "That is no way to speak of the man, Abbey. After all, we are bankrupting ourselves to bring Hollister here—to clean up this Gommorah, make it safe for young women like you—"

Abbey tossed her head defiantly and gestured to the waiting negro to follow her.

"I fail to see the difference," she said, "between the killings you deplore and the men who will die before this Marshal Hollister's guns. You know he's a heartless murderer. That's why he demands so much to wear the star. I—I hope he never shows up, Dad. I don't want his victims on your conscience."

III

THE OUTSPOKEN YOUNG WOman accompanied her father over to where a fringe-topped surrey was waiting. Hollister's mouth held a disillusioned fixture as he saw the two climb into the rig, the negro stowing the girl's bags under the front seat. Criticism never touched him, but his censure from a girl he had never seen before had a cutting quality that surprised him.

The negro mounted the surrey, popped a whip over the team of matched bays, and drove off down Stateline in a boil of dust.

"The hell with it." Hollister chucked his cigar butt aside and crossed the street toward the Kickapoo, making a last mental note of the window's location where he had seen a gun muzzle covering the railroad station.

"To hear the Mayor carry on," someone spoke near him, "you'd think this Hollister hombre was Lord Almighty Himself—"

The group of black-coated business men were lighting up cigars, the mellow aroma of their panatelas floating to Gil Hollister's nostrils as he passed near them.

"Damndest thing," one of the men muttered. "Hollister accepted the job on his own terms. We met his terms. Why didn't he show up?"

By the time the saddle tramp reached the steps of the Kickapoo Saloon the crowd had broken up and gone into the barroom. Stepping through the hooked-back half-doors, Hollister sized up the lamp-lighted saloon, ignoring the jostle of spurred and booted men, Texas trail drovers for the most part, who were bellying the long mahogany bar.

A bartender with a black spitcurl standing out like a comma on his ivory-colored forehead announced loudly, "Drinks are on the house, boys. The great Hollister didn't show up as scheduled, so I got to pay off."

Hollister shouldered through the press of roistering men moving on the bar, having spotted a crudely lettered sign over a rear door which read STAIRS TO PRIVATE GAMBLING ROOMS. GET TICKET FROM ROULETTE CROUPIER OR FARO BANKER. $2 PER HOUR.

Unnoticed by the milling celebrants, Hollister opened the door and stepped into the black gut of a stairwell. He paused to let his pupils accustom themselves to this darkness, and then moved up the rickety steps to an upper hallway dimly lighted by overhead skylights, latched open for ventilation.

The hall ran at right angles to the stairs and was bracketed by the door of cubicles where men could gather around poker tables with more privacy than the downstairs hall afforded. Allotting one street window to the room, Hollister counted off three doors from the south end of the building.

Reaching that door, he paused, wondering if he was too late. Then he heard the rattle of sash weights as the window overlooking the street was pushed shut.

He unbuttoned his shirt and reached inside to unpin the ball-pointed silver star from his undershirt, reflecting as he fixed the badge on his outer garment that he had vowed, the day he left Prairie Junction four years ago, never to pin on this star again. He had told himself that he would keep the emblem, fashioned for him out of a silver dollar by a blacksmith in Abilene years before, as a souvenir of that part of his life which would be forever behind him once he arrived at his Rafter H spread up in Wyoming's Absaroka country.

Twisting the doorknob, he stepped into the unlighted gambling room, at once seeing the silhouetted shape of the big man who sat hunkered at the poker table rolling a smoke.

"That you, Provart?"

The big man's throaty question reassured Hollister that the light was too bad in this room for him to be recognized.

"Light the lamp, Ames."

AS HE SPOKE, Hollister rounded the poker table, keeping out of the dull wash of twilight filtering through the curtained window. Lost in the shadows there, he saw the big shape at the table reaching for the oil lamp, heard him jack up the chimney and scratch a match along the underside of the table.

The match head broke off and there was a delay while the man fumbled in his pocket for another.

"Well, your man didn't show, boss," Ames grunted. "So where does that leave our deal?"

A match burst alight in Buckshot Jim Ames' craggy fist, momentarily blinding the black-whiskered man as he thrust the lucifer over the lampwick.

The flare of matchlight glinted off the twin-barreled rifle leaning against the window. Ames' attention was still on the lamp as Hollister reached for the over-and-under weapon.

"If Hollister said he was showing up today, he'd keep his word, Ames."

The shaggy-jawed man at the poker table jerked his head around, squinting past the lamp's cone of brilliant yellow light to stare at the roughly-dressed saddle bum posted alongside the window.

Sheer surprise kept Ames chained to his barrel chair. The fresh rolled cigarette dropped from his underlip as his gaze ran over the rangy figure before him.

"Who in hell—I thought you was Provart—"

Hollister grinned, slipping a finger through the twin-triggered brass guard of the trick weapon.

"Ames, for a man in the bushwhacking trade your eyesight is bad. Have eight years changed me that much?"

Buckshot Jim Ames came to his feet now, recoiling before the menace of the gun so carelessly held in the saddle tramp's grasp. The color drained from Ames' cheeks, leaving them banana-meat white against which his freckles stood out like flakes of tobacco.

"*Hollister!* By hell, you outfoxed me—"

There was a cedar-stocked Spiller & Burr pistol in Ames' thonged-down half breed holster, but the bushwhacker artist kept his splayed fingers well above waist level as his eyes ran over the bony planes of Hollister's face.

"You got careless with the years, Jim," the marshal said gently. "In your business and in my business, a man can't afford to relax. That's why I wasn't fool enough to step out of a railway car, a prime target for some idiot who might have planted himself in a handy window to ambush me before the city fathers had time to give me to the key to the town."

Buckshot Jim sat down shakily, pure terror glazing the ferocity in his bottle-green eyes. They had met before, these two, in Abilene's smoky heyday, and Gil Hollister would carry to his grave the buckshot scars for which this gun of Ame's was responsible.

"Hollister, you got me wrong," Ames panted desperately, his big fingers clutching the curved rim of the poker table. "Whoever sent you up here—"

Hollister shook his head. "This fancy iron of yours is like a brand of a steer's rump, Jim. Never saw the likes of it anywhere but in your hands."

The marshal gestured toward the six-gun at Ames' side.

"Put that Confederate blunderbuss on the table where I can see it, Ames. We've got some pow-wowing to do. My first official act as marshal of Conestoga Crossing, you might say."

AMES, never taking his eyes off the furbished star on the saddle tramp's chest, reached gingerly with thumb and forefinger for the curved butt of his pistol, lifting it from leather and dropping it on the litter of playing cards and poker chips on the baize beside the lamp.

"Now, Jim," Hollister said confidentially, settling into a chair opposite the bayed gunman, "you mentioned a deal with somebody. Provart. How much was my hide

worth in this town? More than the five hundred you were offered in Abilene, or has my price slipped since I retired to Wyoming?"

Ames licked his lips. Sweat rinsed the pallor of his beetling forehead. His glance flicked like a reptile's toward the door.

"You're jumpin' to conclusions, Gil," he whispered. "I'm waitin'—for some of the boys—to play some stud."

Hollister rested Ames' twin-barrel rifle over the rim of the table and leaned forward.

"I thought maybe you came to Conestoga because the news got out I agreed to be marshal here long enough to clean up this trail town," he said. "Maybe you did. But you got yourself a sponsor to cover your expenses. Somebody named Provart. I want the details."

Ames made a moaning sound low in his throat.

"Give me ten minutes to saddle up, marshal, and I swear you won't see me in your town again. Give me that chance, Gil."

Hollister's lips compressed in a tight roll.

"You mangey skunk, you think I'd risk my backside around this burg, knowing you were on the prowl? A bribed jury turned you loose once, you bushwhackin' son. This time—"

Hollister stood up, the menace in his abrupt movement snapping something in the paralyzed man across the table. Hollister saw the thing he had half expected, the peculiar jerk of Ames' left wrist, as if he were flicking dust out of a handkerchief.

The lamplight winked for an instant on the stubby bore of the .41 derringer concealed in its spring clip under Ames' loose shirt sleeve; and at point blank range Hollister jerked the front trigger of Ames' trick rifle, to explode the shotgun shell waiting in its breech.

The close-bunched pattern of birdshot ripped into Buckshot Jim Ames' shirt, near enough for the bore blast to ignite the fabric there.

In the confines of this tiny cubicle the light-gauge shell roared like a cannon; the crash of Ames' upsetting chair and the thump of the bushwhacker's body on the floor boards came like an echo to that concussion.

Smoke eddied and bounced in the lampshine. A gout of blood from the dead mans' punched-open ribs sizzled as it extinguished the smouldering cloth of his shirt. A long shuddering movement ran the length of Ames' crumpled body, and then he was quite still.

No visible emotion put its reaction on Gil Hollister as he dropped the fuming gun alongside the dead man and stepped to the door. The roar of barroom sounds downstairs was a muffled cacophony in this darkening corridor; no one as yet had started upstairs to investigate the gunshot.

Perhaps it had gone unheard in the pandemonium below.

Walking down the stairs, the saddle tramp removed the law badge from his shirt and thrust it in his pocket. He avoided the barroom entrance, going on down a short hall and stepping out into a murky sideyard flanking the Santa Fe tracks.

A COW TRAIN was rumbling past, the train Hollister had traveled out from Abilene this day. He wondered vaguely if the obstreperous brakeman was still snoozing in the cattle car; the thought remained with him as he watched the red and green tail lights of the caboose recede westward into the gathering night.

Rounding the front corner of the Kickapoo, the colored glass of its windows touching his shabby clothing with rainbow stripes, Hollister paused to scan the signboard over the door. Painted on it in the curlycued letters of the times was AUGUST PROVART, PROP.

"Provart," he mused, rummaging his memory for that name. "Probably a new brand on an old acquaintance back along the trail—"

He walked two blocks north until he found a barber shop, Johansen's Tonsorial Parlors & City Hall. Going inside, he settled himself on a bench to wait his turn for a shave.

As in the Drovers' Cafe, the main topic of conversation between the garrulous barber and his customers was the new marshal and his failure to show up in Conestoga Crossing aboard tonight's Abilene Express.

The customer occupying the chair at the moment chuckled through the swathing folds of a hot towel which revealed only the handle-like protuberance of a red nose.

"The Mayor's datter shore called Hollister for what he is. A damn' slaughter-house killer, He won't last long if he shows up."

Johansen removed the towels and went to work with a razor.

"Well, McPheeters, it'll take a butcher to clean up this camp, way I figger it. Hollister's smart if he decided to renig. The man who wears a star in this hell-hole knows he's livin' on borrowed time. Why should Hollister gamble his hide for a damn' five hundred pesos a month? Now, when I was mayor—"

McPheeters laughed. "Wish you were still mayor, Holger, instead of Overmile. He's out to turn this town into a damn Sunday School picnic. How long do you think we'll last if we don't make the drovers up from Texas feel welcome?"

The barber grunted. "You'd see Fremont Tanks become the shippin' p'int instead of Conestoga, my friend."

WHEN he emerged clean-shaven from the barber shop an hour later, Gil Hollister knew he had lost what immunity to recognition his whiskers had given him upon his arrival in town. But his preliminary incognito survey of Conestoga Crossing had paid off in the hard coin of a temporary security. Before he had even reported for duty at the office of Mayor Claud Overmile, with whom he had carried on a long-range correspondence over a period of months, Hollister had eliminated the potential hazard of a gunman who had reason to hate him for old scores.

The rough element he would be paid to keep in line here knew him only by reputation.

Their personal hatred was as yet a borrowed hate, not a feeling gained by rough contact with him. The hate would build up against him soon enough, and with it the ravening desire to kill this man who flaunted the star. It was part of the risk of his calling, a factor no marshal could avoid if he was honest.

Returning to the Trail's End Hotel, Hollister found the same negro on duty behind the desk. Accepting a pen, he wrote in the soiled register book, *Gilbert Hollister, Moran, Wyo.*, and said to the subservient negro, "You've stalled me in Room Seven, is it? You took my warsack and saddle up?"

The clerk's eyes widened bulbously as he stared at the freshly-barbered man before him.

"Uh—yassuh, I fotched yo' baggage up to Room Seven, suh. You'll excuse dis dumb niggah, suh, for not reco'nizin' yo wif yo' whiskuhs. Dat'll be a dollah a night in advance, suh, 'less'n yo' stay by de week, in witch case ouah rates is a flat five dollah, wid baths two-bits extra per each."

Hollister dropped a twenty dollar bill on the deal counter.

"Let me know when I've run through that, son. There seems to be doubt in some quarters that I'll be around for a month."

The colored man reversed the ledger to mark *"Paid* $20" after his patron's entry in the book. Reading the name, the clerk jerked erect, his thick lips sagging.

"Hollistuh? Lawd he'p me, suh—you ain't *de* Gil Hollistuh? De town-tamin' mahshall Ah been hearin' about fo' the las' week?"

The saddle bum took a key numbered 7 from the rack, helped himself to a stogie from the counter box, bit off the tip and said casually, "Quit starin' at me, boy. I won't bring any lice into your house."

The clerk's eyes rolled bulbously in the black face.

"No, *suh*—ob co'se not. But yo' don't belong in dis yere ho-tel, suh. De Mayuh, Mistuh Obermile, he 'spects you to put up over on de Kansas side, suh. In he high-tone' establishmunt dey calls de Bella Union."

"Why should I let Overmile pick my bunk?"

"Because dis am de tough side ob town, Mistuh Hollistuh. Dis heah house cater to de Texas roughnecks."

Hollister headed toward the lobby stairs. At their foot he turned to admonish the excited Negro:

"I figger I belong on the west side, boy. And see that you keep from blabbin' about me being here, savvy? I don't officially start work until tomorrow morning."

IV

ABBEY OVERMILE RAN UP THE green shades of the Stockman's Bank's plate-glass windows promptly at nine o'clock and then crossed the lobby to unlock the vestibule doors for the day's business. It being the height of the trail-driving season, the usual complement of beef buyers from the packeries in K.C. and Omaha were waiting on the vestibule benches, to pick up the specie they would be paying cattlemen down at the railroad yards during the course of another day's bidding.

As befitted her station as a teller in her father's bank, Abbey was dressed in a white shirt waist and austere brown skirt, a costume which did not wholly conceal the provocative lines of her well-rounded figure. Her glossy wheat-blonde hair was pulled back demurely from the oval of her face and knotted in a bun at the back of her neck, and her sun-bronzed arms were covered, as they always were during working hours, with black sateen sleeve guards.

"I swear you don't look like the same girl who got off the train yesterday," a florid-faced buyer commented, taking his place at the front of the line which formed in front of her teller's wicket—although during rush season Claud Overmile hired three extra tellers, who waited, unnoticed, at their row of cages on either side of the girl. "How was the big city, Abbey?"

The girl accepted the man's draft and went back to the vault for her cash box. When she returned she said saucily, "Crowded as always, Mister Ebright. Why, there must be ten thousand people jammed into K.C. How can you bear to live in such a place?"

The beef buyer ran his eyes appraisingly over the swell of Abbey's bosom as she deftly counted out packets of currency.

"Any time it gets lonesome in this prairie-dog town, Abbey, you're welcome to take over at my roost. I'd load you down with a queen's ransom in jewelry and give you a shiny Victoria and a team of spankin' blacks that would make those fleabags in the corral out at your Dad's ranch look like—glue factory bait. How about it?"

Abbey Overmile met the laughter of the customers behind Ebright with the smile that answered their innocuous ribbing in the spirit it was given.

"Is that a marriage proposal, sir?"

Ebright bowed, stuffing a leather case with greenbacks.

"What else, dear lady? Am I not an eligible bachelor, as witty as I am handsome?"

"Of course — but what would Mrs. Ebright and the six little Ebrights say? Besides, I don't want to rattle up and down city streets in a Victoria. Give me a fast pony and the open range with the wind in my hair. A few days of that gets the smell of K.C. out of my nose."

ABBEY took care of the remaining patrons in the queue with a chatty informality which reddened the cheeks of the other tellers, who were trying to appear busy at their respective cages. Finally, when the early-morning rush was over, Abbey tidied the receipts and deposit slips on her spike and slid a little placard reading NEXT WINDOW, PLEASE under her wicket.

As she was turning to leave her cubicle the placard flew past her and hit the floor.

Picking it up, Abbey Overmile found herself looking into the crooked grin of a tall, chestnut-haired man who possessed the most penetrating gunmetal blue eyes she had ever seen.

"Bad draft in here, Miss," he said. "You better tack the barn door shut."

Abbey frowned slightly. "The teller at the next window—"

The tall man cut in with, "I'm not here to transact any banking business, Abbey. I understand your father is the ramrod of this gilded morgue dedicated to the barter of filthy lucre and six percent interest compounded semi-annually, as well as holding the reins of city government hereabouts?"

Abbey felt her first resentment ebbing before the frank humor lurking at the corners of this stranger's wide mouth. She could not immediately fit him into the category of the usual patrons who came to the Stockman's Bank & Trust.

His garb, for one thing. The russet-brown, black-lapeled coat was not garish enough to be a drummer's, engaged in a little flirtations overture, nor drab enough

to class him as one of the many professional gamblers from the other side of Stateline Street.

The black silk cravat at his throat was devoid of any diamond-studded horseshoe or other adornment of a cardsharp; the lace-brimmed, flat-crowned gray Stetson he held in his bronzed, rope-calloused fingers was definitely the headgear of a range rider. Yet his voice carried none of the accent of a Lone Star rancher, up the trail with a herd.

"You know my name, sir?"

"I know a lot about you, ma'am. At the moment I am trying to find out whether your father, the esteemed Mayor of Conestoga Crossing, is on the premises."

Abbey bit her lip, uncertain as to whether this man had by any inflection of voice or smirk of expression earned a rebuff. "My father is always at his office an hour before the bank opens its doors," she said. "You wish to see him? Do you have an appointment?"

He nodded gravely. "I *had* an appointment—at seven-ten yesterday evening. I reckon Mr. Overmile is still expecting me. In spite of any adverse publicity his daughter may have poured into his ears."

Abbey stepped out of her cubicle and walked up to the main counter to unlatch a drop-leaf entrance. The stranger, looming a full six inches above six feet, stepped behind the barricade and stood by expectantly.

She saw that he wore buckskin-foxed levis tucked into spurred Coffeyvilles, and that under his russet, full-tailed coat was the tell-tale bulge of twin six-guns. It was the latter detail that confirmed the prescience his words had brought her.

"You are—what is your business with my father, sir?"

The stranger shrugged. "I believe you catalogued me at the Santa Fe station last evening as a butcher—a cold-blooded butcher. A mistake which we will let pass until we know each other better, ma'am."

ABBEY'S FACE flamed scarlet as she turned with a swish of skirts and led the way to a frosted glass door alongside the bank vault, labeled OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT. PRIVATE. The stranger followed her into the small reception room beyond that door, Abbey noticing that the bank tellers were watching them in wide-eyed curiosity.

Shutting the door and standing against it, Abbey Overmile said coldly, "So you are the great, the terrible giant among men, Mister Gilbert Hollister. The man whose very name makes the blood of evil doers run cold. I cannot say I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Hollister."

Hollister flipped his Stetson onto a pronghorn rack behind the reception desk. As he adjusted the set of his coat on his shoulders Abbey glimpsed the silver star pinned to his austere vest, and the double buckles of his cartridge harness criss-crossing his midriff.

"Your father seems to think my coming will make this town more pleasant for spoiled young ladies like you to roam in," he jibed mockingly. "You are very beautiful when you are angry, Miss Abbey. Are your feathers always ruffled, or is that the only way I have ever happened to see you?"

Abbey bit her lips, fighting for self-control. "The only good thing about this business," she said finally, "is that you will not live to strut our streets long. You say you know something about me. Well, Mr. Hollister, I know a lot about you, and your ruthlessness. You should work as a slaughterman at a pig packery. Maybe that would sate your lust for blood."

Gil Hollister dropped his mask of joviality and his voice was almost gentle as he said, "Miss Abbey, your opinion of me is more important to me than you can guess. Some day when you are in a listening mood I might tell you why I buckled on these guns, why I pinned on this star."

Abbey strode past him on the way to the door of her father's inner office. At that door she wheeled to face him.

"Let's get one thing straight at the outset, Mr. Hollister. What you think of my opinions of you matters not a jot or tittle to me, and it never will, not even if you level the West Side to the ground. I hate you and all the violence you stand for. This town is going to pay you five hundred dollars a month as your wage for taming its rought element. Don't ever expect your contract to include my friendship, or the respect of any other decent person in Conestoga."

It was a long speech for Abbey Over-

mile, one that left her panting. Before she could turn to the door it opened and framed the tall, distinguished looking shape of the town's leading citizen, Claud Overmile.

"What's going on, Abbey?" the bank president asked sharply, his stern glance shuttling from his daughter to the tall, taut-faced stranger across the room.

Abbey turned away from the silver-haired oldster.

"Here's your man-eater, Dad. Your town-taming marshal, Mr. Hollister. I made one mistake about him, Dad. I see that he does not wear horns or a cloven hoof."

V

UNLOCKING A MAHOGANY cabinet behind his polished desk, Claud Overmile took out a decanter of brandy and a pair of glasses. Seated in front of his desk, Gil Hollister was savoring the rich smoke of one of the banker's imported perfectos.

"This town," Overmile said, "has a reputation for being a man-for-breakfast town. The appellation is not entirely apocryphal. During a recent ten-day period the coroner has buried nine men who died violently on the West Side."

Hollister waved aside the proferred glass. "I never drink during working hours, Overmile."

The banker's eyes narrowed approvingly behind the polished lenses of his pince-nez.

"You are a clever man, Hollister. As clever as you are ruthless. No doubt that is why you have lived so long to wear a star."

Hollister said, "You talk like your daughter."

"I'm sorry about that. You see, the decision to import you as a last resort to—ah, liquidate the evil forces which are giving this town a bad name throughout the frontier—is a direct result of my being Mayor. The situation calls for a killer. There is no other solution to our problem. Meet violence with violence. Abbey disapproves of violence."

Hollister's brows gathered in a scowl. "I would resent your inference if I didn't know it was well-meant," he said somberly. "I have never shot a man except in self-defense and in the performance of my duty. Taking human life is not a pleasant thing. I hope to be able to earn my pay here without resorting to gun-play. If you're expecting a wholesale slaughter of the rough ones across the street, I've had my trip down from Wyoming for nothing. I'm not your man."

Hollister coughed. "Of course, Hollister. I—I didn't mean—That is, you've got to understand how things are. We—the decent citizens of Conestoga Crossing—want to keep the wild bunch out, permanently. This is 1883. The time is past for the rough justice of the gun and knife. All we expect of you is to enforce the law."

Hollister got up from his plush-covered chair and strode over to the window overlooking a segment of Stateline Street, his eyes focussed on the garish facade of Provart's Kickapoo Saloon down by the Sante Fe tracks. He wondered if Buckshot Jim Ames' corpse was now reposing on the coroner's slab, or whether Provart would hush up the killing in his saloon.

"Who rules the roost on the West Side?" he asked casually.

Overmile drummed the mahogany desk top with manicured nails.

"A hierarchy straight from Satan's pit, Hollister. A jezebel by the name of Katherine Stengel, better known locally as One-Eye Kate, governs the vile affairs of the sporting houses on Cimarron Street. The saloonkeepers look to the owner of the Trail's End Hotel, a Hun by the name of Utendorffer, for their orders, their rules of conduct, or misconduct. The gambling element is under the thumb of a tinhorn from New Orleans, true name unknown. His alias in Conestoga is Provart, August Provart."

The lawman at the window nodded, picking this information apart in his head. He thought, Provart could be Steamboat Sam Crullers, maybe, and to confirm that hunch he put an innocent-sounding question to the banker behind him.

"This man Provart runs the Kickapoo Casino?"

"Yes. For a man who has been in town only overnight you have picked up a lot of pertinent information, Hollister."

"A man in my job has to scout the trail

pretty carefully. Does Provart sport a diamond inlay in a front tooth?"

"By George, yes!—A vuglar ostentation. Do you know the man?"

HOLLISTER fingered the track of a knife scar under his collar, remembering the wild night aboard the Mississippi River gambling packet *Memphis Siren* when the bowie blade of a tinhorn sport calling himself Steamboat Sam Crullers had missed his jugular by a cigarette paper's breadth.

He was thinking, "Conestoga is beginning to look like a gathering of the clan," but he ignored Overmile's question as he turned to face the cowtown's mayor and said, "I took this job for two reasons, Mayor. Firstly because of a personal crusade which put me into this business in the first place, when I saw my own father stabbed to death in a trail town alley for the paltry pennies he had collected from a beef sale. My second reason, the selfish one your daughter would look for, is that I need money to develop my own outfit up in Wyoming. Ready cash is hard to come by, that far from a market. The pay I will take out of this town—if I am lucky—will go into Texas feeders."

Overmile gulped down a shot of brandy, shuddered, and nodded.

"There are to be no strings attached to my office," Hollister went on. "If the town figures I'm not doing my job, I will expect to get my walking papers from you. Understood?"

Overmile wet his lips with a fat tongue, lacing his fingers together over his paunch as he nodded fatuously.

"Of course. No strings. We—uh, anticipate that you will enforce the ordinance passed by the city council last year to the effect that no firearms will be carried on the streets by anyone visiting the town."

Hollister flipped his cigar out the open window.

"I will enforce no such half-baked law cooked up by a bunch of well-fed idealists around a council table, sir."

Overmile's procine face twisted.

"What?"

"These no-gun-toting rules . . . they can't be enforced by one marshal, or by a platoon of cavalry. I won't be fool enough to insult the honest Texans who bring their cattle to your town for shipment by posting any such order."

Overmile's flabby mouth gaped like a stranded fish's.

"But Hollister—you could nip these killings in the bud—take away the tools of murder and you—"

The banker's outraged righteousness trailed off as he saw the new marshal head for the reception room and come back with his Stetson slanted at a jack-deuce angle across his head.

"Who's the coroner hereabouts and where is his office?"

Claud Overmile walked over to open the alley door of his private office, pointing down Stateline's row of business concerns in the direction of the Sante Fe depot.

"The coroner runs the Prairie Pride Furniture Store. A man named Kelsey, very competent official. Uh, before you go, Hollister, if you need an introduction at the Bella Union—"

Hollister stepped out into the alley, unbuttoning his coat to hitch his gun harness.

"I told you I've already booked a room at the Trail's End. Too much fol-de-rol at the Bella Union."

"But a man in your position—to be living in a cheap—"

Something in Hollister's eyes made Overmile break off.

"Mayor, there's something I want to know," Hollister said. "This town depends on the Texas ranchers shipping their beef from this railhead for its existence. Right?"

The banker nodded.

"If I really tame this town for you, spike the drovers' fun, close up the red-light houses, do all these other things your letters outlined for me to do—there'll be no more cattle drives to Conestoga Crossing. You realize that?"

"I do. That is, I disagree with you. Your job is to give Conestoga such a reputation that the riffraff, the outlaw element, will shy clear of us. That should not affect the bulk of the Texas trade."

HOLLISTER grinned crookedly. "Drive out the owlhooter and you drive out the honest, fun-loving, hell-roaring cowhand who wants to celebrate

after two months on a dry trail. Now do you want me to slap a padlock on every saloon that has a killing?"

Claud Overmile drew himself up into the perfect epitome of a self-righteous, crusading reformer.

"The council made that quite clear in our correspondence with you, sir. Every questionable enterprise on the West Side should be locked up, and you will find plenty of legal excuse for so doing. That, Mr. Hollister, is your job in Conestoga."

Hollister gestured toward the brick wall of the bank.

"If Conestoga becomes too pure to attract the trade of the Chisholm Trail outfits—if they should switch their trade up the line, say to Fremont Tanks, where everything is wide open—how long do you think your bank would remain in business?"

Overmile's answer puzzled him at this moment, but it was to stick in Hollister's mind as hinting more than lay on the surface:

"If this bank must depend on the iniquities of the West Side, sir, then I would glady lock its doors. Before we part company, Mr. Hollister, I hope to see the West Side a ghost town."

For a long moment Hollister regarded the sanctimonious figure in the bank door. Then, without so much as a farewell word, he turned and headed for the street.

At the Prairie Pride Furniture Outfitters he introduced himself to the lanky oldster whose most flourishing trade was conducted in his back rooms, that of an undertaker.

"I would like to see your mortality records of men who died of gunshot wounds in the past twenty-four hours, Mr. Kelsey."

The coroner's lips puckered in a smile that laced his mouth like the seam-scars of a surgeon's sutures.

"I am happy to report that no man has died violently in this town in the past week, Mr. Hollister. If you will pardon my saying so, sir, perhaps this is a result of the news getting out that you have consented to be our Marshal, sir."

Kelsey's eyes broke before the level stare he received.

"You're certain no killing has been reported in the last twenty-four hours?"

"Of course, sir. As coroner it is my unhappy duty to pick up the remains of—"

"All right," Hollister said, turning to leave. "By the way, Kelsey, the county pays you fifty dollars for every stiff you plant who died without leaving enough to meet funeral expenses, is that right?"

Ben Kelsey composed his face with professional dignity.

"The State of Colorado pays a fee of fifty dollars for pauper burials," he said. "Deaths occurring on the Kansas side bring me forty."

Hollister's eyes held no mirth. "Then if I bring a halt to these wholesale killings on the West Side of Stateline your income will suffer, won't it, coroner?"

Kelsey's toothless jaw gaped open.

"Uh—I beg your pardon, Mr. Hollister—if you think I want to grow rich on the murders of unfortunate men — harrumph! I resent your inference, sir!"

HOLLISTER left the undertaker's and, aware that his arrival in Conestoga had traveled the grapevine and that he was the cynosure of all eyes this morning, crossed the street and without breaking stride made his way to August Provart's Kickapoo Saloon & Casino blanking the railroad.

A swamper was cleaning out the filthy residue of the previous night's trade when Hollister shouldered through the batwing doors and went straightway to the rear alley of the bar and knocked on a door marked PRIVATE OFFICE — KEEP OUT.

He heard the squeak of a swivel chair inside and knew that Provart was in. Meeting the eye of the consumptive barfly who was swamping out the barroom for free beers, the marshal said cryptically,

"Clean 'er up good, Dad. The Kickapoo won't be open for business any more, I have a hunch."

The door opened to frame a squatty-built man in his shirtsleeves, a malodorous cheroot clamped between teeth from which a two-carat diamond winked in the murky light.

"Howdy, Provart," Hollister said, edging past the saloon boss before the man could launch a protest. "Or would it be opening old wounds to call you Steamboat Sam?"

Provart's pallid face turned a shade

paler as he slammed the door shut and stood staring at his visitor as he might at a ghost from the long-dead past. Finally a grin twitched the pomaded black mustaches which forked out on either side of a bulbous, crooked-bridged nose.

"I been expecting you, Hollister. What can I do for you?"

Hollister glanced around the office, its walls covered with nude paintings from whiskey calendars, the rolltop desk littered with an accumulation of waybills and miscellaneous junk, prominent among which was Provart's coiled shell belt and Colt six-shooter.

"Apparently you haven't heard of the city ordinance," Hollister drawled, "making it a prison offense to run a business house in which there has occurred an unreported murder."

Provart's beady eyes glanced ceilingward in spite of the saloonkeeper's ingrained caution.

"Ames!" he whispered hoarsely. "You killed Ames—and I was the dumb blind fool who passed it off for suicide—"

Hollister slid his fingers fanwise under his gun belts.

"Suicide or not, you didn't call the coroner to pick up the body. Where is it?"

A start of panic flickered in Provart's eyes.

"It's—I had the house men plant Ames before daylight this mornin', Hollister. Down by the river tannery. It gives a gamblin' house a bad name to have a suicide in it—"

Hollister nodded matter-of-factly.

"*'Sta nada.* You cheated our worthy coroner out of his burial fee for indigent citizens. We'll overlook the obvious fact that you imported Ames to bushwhack me the day I got to town, Sam."

A wicked shine touched Provart's eyes as he pulled his nerves together. The diamond on his buck tooth winked in the light pouring through the window beyond the desk.

"Look, my town-taming hero," he bit out. "Last time we crossed horns I was a two-bit tinhorn on a riverboat. That's been —ten years, ain't it? In Conestoga I'm not a tinhorn, Gil. When I whisper 'frog,' men as tough as you hop and hop fast. Don't start anything you can't finish, star man."

The grin Provart remembered of old touched Hollister's lips.

"I won't," he said softly. "I understand you're the kingpin of the gambling-joint buckos in this burg. That's embarrassing. Because your Kickapoo Casino is getting a padlock slapped on it at high noon, Provart. For failure to report a homicide committed on the premises . . . I'll see you at noon."

Long after Hollister had made his departure, Gus Provart stood clamping and unclamping his fists, trying to fight himself out of the funk he was in.

"That damn' Injun wouldn't dare carry out his bluff," Provart told himself. "Padlockin' my place would be his death warrant. Hell, he committed that murder. Before he was really the marshal. He's bluffin' about closin' me up. Or is he?"

No, Hollister wasn't a bluffer. His noon deadline was still better than two hours away. Provart would have his answer then.

VI

CONESTOGA'S JAIL WAS A squat structure on Postoak Street, the barred windows along its bullpen wall facing the bagnios on Cimarron where the fancy women plied their ancient trade. It was solid enough to withstand a lynch mob, being fashioned of whipsawed two-by-twelve planks stacked on top of each other and roofed over with rusty sheet-iron, three layers thick.

A pile of cottonwood logs had been dumped into the back yard of the jail and as Gil Hollister approached the building he saw two prisoners, left ankles shackled to fifty-pound Oregon boots, bucksawing the logs into stovewood lengths.

The front door had a sign painted on it, MARSHAL'S OFFICE. Someone had whittled a bunch of tally marks into the panels with a knife blade. Ten of them. Probably the census of the men who had worn the star before in Conestoga Crossing, the majority of them waiting out eternity over in boothill.

Hollister unlocked the door with the key Mayor Overmile had given him at the outset of their interview this morning. The marshal's office was a ten-by-ten cubicle equipped with a spur-scarred rolltop desk, a file cabinet for wanted posters,

a couple of rickety barrel chairs held together with baling wire, a brass spittoon overflowing with cigar butts, and a locked gun cabinet.

A rawboned oldster was dozing in the far corner of the office, warped boots propped on the rusty fenders of a heating stove. His mouth was open and a bluebottle fly was buzzing around his tobacco-streaked waterfall mustache. There was a tin star on one of the oldster's gallus straps.

Hollister fished through the keys Overmile had supplied him and found one which opened the gun cabinet. Conestoga's municipal arsenal was in bad shape. Hollister counted a sawed-off ten-gauge greener, an old bolt-action Army Springfield probably confiscated from some prisoner in the past, a Model 73 Winchester with a cracked stock and a missing magazine, and two holstered revolvers with the owners' names attached on tags, probably the property of the unhappy wood-sawyers in the back yard.

The bullpen door was open and Hollister sauntered inside. He recalled what the Sante Fe brakeman had told him about this calaboose, and found the description rosier than fact. No air stirred in this dimly-lighted hole. It stank of mouldy mattresses and chamber pots and uncleaned spittoons.

There were eight cells, four on each side, none occupied.

With a grimace of distaste, Hollister went back to the front office, closing the bullpen door behind him. He propped the street door open to ventilate the office, knowing he would spend as little time as possible in these shabby headquarters, and sat down at his predecessor's desk.

From a drawer he took out a batch of dogeared reward posters, selected one at random, and with the soft nose of a .45 cartridge proceeded to letter the sign he would tack on the locked door of Provart's place later this morning:

CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE
BY ORDER OF GIL HOLLISTER.
CITY MARSHAL

This sign might prove to be his death warrant. Hollister shrugged off the morbid thought, wondering if age was creeping up on him. When a marshal began thinking of the consequences of any official act, it meant his nerve was shot and he was as good as dead already.

No. This sign, which would be read by every Texas cowhand coming up the trail this summer, was in reality the battle flag of his cause, the guidon banner advertising his authority. That was the way to look at it . . .

He shucked off his coat and removed a matched pair of ivory-stocked Colt Peacemakers, calibre .44, from his oak-tanned holsters. These were the self-same guns that had blazed red chapters in frontier history over the past decade. Guns he had thought to hang up forever when he moved to his Rafter H up in Wyoming, north of the Hole-in-the-Wall.

HOLLISTER was cleaning and oiling the weapons when the old man sleeping in the corner roused himself with a series of snorts like a buffalo working out of a wallow. Hollister glanced up to see the old-timer standing at ram-rod attention, his rheumy blue eyes eyeing his new boss with the reverence of a hero-worshipper.

The old man wore patched army pants with the yellow stripe of the cavalry on the outseam. A veteran too old to have served with Custer, dead these past eight years up in Montana. His faded campaign shirt carried the streaking remnants of inverted triple V's, indicating that this derelict had once been a non-com.

"At ease, sergeant," Hollister grinned. "I'm Hollister. You the jailer?"

The old soldier coughed, wiping his mustaches with a hand that carried the twisted scars of a rebel bayonet.

"I'm right pleased to meet ye, Marshal," the derelict husked out. "I'm Colonel Conway, suh—Jeb Conway. Your night marshal. My shift starts at midnight, runs till high noon. That's when you take over."

Hollister reloaded his Colt cylinders, leaving an empty under the firing pin as was his custom, and returned the guns to leather.

"You out-rank me, Colonel," Hollister grinned. "I was born in '51, too slick behind the ears to serve in the War Between the States, but I was a corporal in the Militia down in San Antone long enough

to pester the carpetbaggers."

Old Jeb Conway looked flustered. "You rate a salute from me, then, suh. I fit at Gettysburg as a buck private, got a minnie ball in the knee an' was mustered out by the medicos. This here shirt with the sarjint's stripes I picked out of a rag barrel onct."

The two shook hands gravely, formalities over. Neither appeared to see anything ludicrous in the fact that "Colonel" Conway had been sleeping during the shank-end of his tour of duty.

"Those ball-and-chain rannihans outside —what you got them booked for?" Hollister inquired.

Conway hobbled over to the desk, betraying that he had a peg leg, fished the jail register out of the debris and scanned the latest entries.

"Joe Smith an' Sam Brown. Blotted brands—we've had fifty Smiths an' Browns in the hoosegow while I been here, which is goin' on four years now . . . Saddle bums turned over to the late lamented Marshal Sperry, suh, by the conductor of a Santy Fee freight train. The judge give 'em sixty days for vagrancy."

Hollister said, "I wonder how much Sperry gave the conductor? No matter, Colonel. Let's have the key to those Oregon boots."

The night marshal turned over a pair of rusty keys. Hollister strolled outside, halting beside the woodpile. The two prisoners stopped their sawing, regarding the marshal's star with sullen silence.

"How long you been on this woodpile?" Hollister asked.

One of the pair said surlily, "Six days."

Hollister squatted down to unlock the leg irons of both men.

"Jingle your spurs, boys," he said. "Vamose."

The two saddle tramps stared at each other as if doubting their senses. Both had fifty-four days to go on their sentence.

From the corner of the jailhouse Colonel Conway called out in an aggrieved voice, "Hoboes are scarce this time o' year, marshal. You ain't got half enough wood to last out the winter."

Hollister pulled out his watch. The prisoner who called himself Joe Smith spoke up harshly. "You mean we're free to ramble, boss?"

The marshal retorted, "I've tangled with these railroad tough ones myself, boys. Keep out of my way, otherwise stick around Conestoga as long as you like."

Joe Smith passed a shaky hand over his eyes.

"And we heard Gil Hollister had a 'dobe brick for a heart," he told his companion. "Marshal, if you ever git in a tight, I hope we're around to back your play."

HOLLISTER was heading back to the jail, dragging the Oregon boots behind him. At the jail entrance Colonel Conway was waggling his head, repeating plaintively, "We ain't got half enough wood to see us to the first winter blizzard, boss—"

The marshal grinned, "Hell, I don't expect to be around to see the first geese flyin' over, let alone snow. Go to your bunk and catch up on your sleep, Colonel. I'll take over. You might rustle up somebody to swamp out the jail. It's filthier'n a pig sty."

Joe Smith and Sam Brown, coming into the jail to get their meager possessions out of their cells, overheard Hollister's remark to the night marshal and exchanged glances. Smith said,

"Reckon we'll mop up and scrub out the place before we take off, Hollister. God knows it can stand soakin' in sheep dip."

When Hollister left the jail twenty minutes later, his placard for the Kickapoo Saloon folded and tucked into a hip pocket, he found Colonel Conway still lingering around.

"Hollister," the night marshal said, falling into step beside Hollister as they headed toward Stateline Street, "you know what? I think you won't last long in Conestoga."

"Thanks," Hollister said drily.

"Not because you ain't chain lightnin' with yore hoglegs, not because you ain't got guts enough to overload a butcher's wagon, because you have, I ain't doubtin' that. But you're turnin' soft, marshal. The town will hear about you lettin' them hard cases loose, flyin' agin' the judge's orders. It won't help yore rep in this burg, Hollister."

At the corner of Postoak and Stateline, the night marshal paused in front of the

Jayhawker Saloon, where he habitually downed a nip of red-eye after coming off duty.

"Things are perty quiet daytimes," Conway said. "It's when the Texicans come up from the loadin' pens an' the bedgrounds on the flats 'tother side of the river that you can expect hell to break loose."

Hollister ignored the remark, having from long practical experience figured out the fixed pattern that trail-town violence always took. Conestoga would be no different than other hell-towns Hollister had known. Quiet by day, hell-roaring by night.

At the moment his eye was attracted to an uncommonly beautiful woman of mature years who was riding down the middle of Stateline in a surrey driven by a negro lacky and drawn by a pair of matched bays which he recognized as belonging to Mayor Overmile.

The woman's face was partially obscured by a straw sailor, and she kept her eyes fixed straight ahead, as befitted a lady passing in review of the roughnecks loafing in the shade of the West Side saloon awnings.

As she came abreast of Hollister the woman's glance shifted to meet his, lingering with an interest Hollister could not mistake. He was reaching automatically for his hat when he saw the woman's glance shift toward a tall, black-coated man who at this moment was stepping out of Johansen's Barber Shop.

And between these two passed an unspoken signal, the woman in the surrey giving the black-coated man a smile which he returned.

AS DUST DRIFTED in to put its dry bitter smell on Hollister's nostrils he noticed that the black-coated man was staring after the lady in the surrey, eyes bright with more than a casual interest. This pair shared some illicit secret.

Schooled to observe the tiny cross-currents of life which passed his eye, Hollister decided at once that this man—a professional gambler, from the look of him—had an intimate acquaintance with the woman in the Mayor's carriage.

He glanced around to see if anyone else had witnessed this discreet exchange of greetings and saw the spit-and-whistle boys lining the Jayhawker benches grinning at each other. What made this interesting to Hollister was the fact that the woman was definitely not a "west-sider," not a jezebel from the brothels which lined Cimarron Street. There was an indefinable air of quality about her and her equipage, which in the next moment was verified when Hollister saw the surrey swing east on Postoak, headed toward the genteel residential section of the town.

Hollister turned to find Conway still at his elbow, scanning his new superior with eyes that held a certain lascivious wisdom in their faded depths.

"Wasn't that the Mayor's rig and driver, Colonel?" Hollister asked.

Conway grinned and spat into the dust.

"Sharp guesswork, marshal. That was Aurora Overmile, the Mayor's wife. She was a St. Louis society dame when Claud fetched her out to Dodge City as his bride."

Hollister's eyes narrowed. "Mrs. Overmile isn't the Mayor's first wife, then?"

"Far as I know she is."

"But the girl, Abbey. She must be twenty—"

His informant again prefaced his remarks by spitting a brown quid into the gutter.

"Abbey Overmile is an adopted datter of the Mayor's, Marshal. You'd best git the details from her. If an' pervidin' you are in'trusted, o' course."

For reasons he could not immediately analyze, it came as good news to know that the headstrong girl in the bank was no blood kin to the backwoods politico who had been responsible for bringing him to this town.

He brushed that angle out of his mind as he pondered something else, hinting as it did of another facet of Conestoga's private lives: what link could exist between the mayor's wife, who probably occupied the position of leader of the east side's genteel society, and a man given to the garish appurtenances of a tinhorn sport?

Hollister turned with the intention of asking the night marshal to identify the black coated man, only to see Conway disappearing into the Jaywalker Saloon.

As he turned to resume his stroll downstreet, Hollister found his path blocked by the tall, suavely-mannered man in the black coat. He exuded an odor of bay rum and hair tonic.

"You vill be der new marshal?" The man's voice carried a thick Prussian accent, which went with the blocky skull and shoebrush pompadour revealed under the man's cuffed-back Keevil hat.

Hollister nodded. Neither man offered his hand. Behind this tinhorn's murky, slitted eyes Hollister read the pure malice of a man who skirted the thin edges of the law.

"I understant you intent to close Gus Provart's gambling house, Herr Hollister?"

"News gets around," the marshal grinned. "Matter of fact I'm on my way to padlock the Kickapoo now. I gave Provart till noon to dispose of his inventory."

The big man shook his head.

"I vould not like to see you make der mistake your first day behint der star, marshal. Permid me to intorduce myself. I am Fritz Utendorffer, head of der local Saloonowner's Association. Vot you intent to do to Provart comes indirectly into my sphere of interest."

Hollister's eyes narrowed. "Meaning what, Utendorffer?"

"I adwise you to reconsider your decision, marshal, if you vish to live long in diss town."

VII

HOLLISTER'S INTAKE OF breath made a soft sibilance across his teeth. This Utendorffer was a member of the triumvirate including Provart and One-Eye Kate who ruled the destinies of Conestoga's iniquitous West Side.

Through the tail of his eye the marshal saw that this meeting was being witnessed by scores of men who, by accident or design, had been drawn to the windows and porches of the deadfalls which put a solid front to the street along this block.

Here was an opportunity to drive a lesson home where it would do the most good, an opportunity Hollister would have arranged had events been under his control.

Now, his metallic eyes betraying none of the anger that Utendorffer's whispered ultimatum put in his blood, he said quietly, "You can speak plainer English than that, Utendorffer."

The big German's spiked mustaches twitched to the compression of his predatory mouth.

"Der marshal who preceded you vas younk an' tough like yourself, Hollister. He made der mistage of closing a house belongink to my Association. Dot night he vas found deadt in der mud of der Cimarron mitt a knife in hiss ribs. Der only t'ing missink from der body vas der key to the padlock—"

Hollister's left hand reached up as innocently as if he had intended to brush a mosquito off his cheek.

It shot out and up, fisting the broadcloth pleats of Untendorffer's immaculate starched shirt, and the jerk of it lifted the big German to his toe-tips and pulled him off balance, setting him up for the chopping uppercut which Hollister exploded on the man's porcine jaw.

"That's for threatening a peace officer, Fritz—"

The crash of Utendorffer's great body hitting the loose planks of the sidewalk drew an echo from the clapboard front of the Jayhawker.

Somewhere in the distance a man yelled "Fight!" and there was a rataplan of running boots coming up the walk.

Hollister saw the fallen gambler prop himself up on one elbow, shaking his head to clear it, growling deep in his throat like a wounded bull.

Then Utendorffer was on his knees, his right hand flashing under his fustian lapel toward a hide-out gun.

Hollister coldly held his ground until the sunrays flashed on gun steel clearing the hem of Utendorffer's coat. Then he lashed out a spurred boot, smashing the German's gun wrist and sending the .38 Bisley flying into space.

The marshal reached down, hauling Utendorffer to his feet, right arm cocked for the pay-off punch. But the gambler was fast. His left hand lanced down to a bootleg and snapped a ten-inch bowie from a concealed sheath there, twisting the blade in his hand as he lashed out the weapon in a stabbing upward stroke that would have disembowled a man in an eye's wink.

The knife caught Hollister off guard, but he parried the thrust with an outjutting knee and thus gained the time it took to seize Utendorffer's powerful arm

with both fists.

They grappled briefly and then both men hit the planks as Hollister wedged a knee between the German's legs, putting all his falling weight on Utendorffer's arm, crowding it up behind the gambler's shoulder blades.

The bowie dropped from Utendorffer's hand. A bawl of anguish escaped Utendorffer's throat as he felt tendons snapping under the cruel pressure of Hollister's leverage.

The crack of bones giving way before that pressure reached the ears of the men who by now formed a rough circle around the arena of combat. Hollister let go his grip, saw the arm dangle limply at a grotesque angle as Utendorffer rolled over on his face, fainting from the agony of his hurt.

HOLLISTER frisked the fallen man, brought another .38 Bisley from a holster under his other armpit. He jacked open the cylinder, spilled out cartridges and restored the gun to a voluminous pocket of the gambler's coat.

Then the marshal, breathing only slightly faster than normal, lifted his eyes to meet the grim phalanx of faces rimming him about, knowing that every man who had witnessed this brief foray had hoped to see him spill his guts in the dust. Their manifest hatred for the law was that plain.

"This bucko," Hollister addressed the crowd, "threatened me with a bushwhack if I performed the duty expected of my star. Pass the word along. I'm an easy-going hombre. This Hun was lucky to get off with a crippled wing."

He heard a man wearing a bar apron labeled JAYHAWKER SALOON address him sneeringly, "Have you made your will, Lord Hollister?"

The bartender retreated into the saloon before the level strike of Hollister's glance. Shifting his eyes, the marshal picked out Colonel Conway standing on the saloon step, waggling his head dolefully from side to side.

"You're still on duty, Conway!" Hollister snapped. "Lug this tinhorn over to the pokey and lock him up. Then rustle up a medico and get his arm set."

Conway hobbled forward, his peg leg making its loud thump in the roundabout silence.

"Boss," the old night marshal whispered as he bent over Utendorffer, "you're stark ravin' loco. This man runs the West Side."

Hollister dismissed Utendorffer from his thoughts, elbowing through the gathering press to resume his way down Stateline Street. He was aware of a new respect among the onlookers as they scurried out of his path, and knew that this street brawl with Utendorffer had established him as the bull of the herd in this town.

Up to now, he was an unknown quantity, untested, drawing on his past reputation. By manhandling a character of Fritz Utendorffer's standing in the West Side, he had dispelled any doubts this town might have had of him.

He saw by the hands of a jeweler's clock across the street that it lacked five minutes of twelve noon. By now Conestoga Crossing knew what that hour implied in his campaign to clean up the town's tough spots. The center of Conestoga's collective attention had now shifted to Provart's saloon down by the railroad tracks.

Hollister felt the hairs on his neck-nape stiffening, knew how alone he was, making his way down this street, half expecting to feel the shock of a bullet in his back.

But no, that would not come in broad daylight, on the open street. Whoever had marked him for death would wait their time, choose their place to strike. From this moment on Hollister knew he was living on borrowed time.

He heard a strike of steps crossing the hardpan of the street from the direction of the bank, and he turned to halt in genuine surprise as he recognized Abbey Overmile quartering across Stateline, manifestly intending to intercept him.

He doffed his Stetson and stood waiting as the girl came to a halt before him.

"Isn't the west side out of bounds, ma'am?" he asked softly.

THE GIRL'S ATTENTION was momentarily on the knot of men trooping after the four white-jacketed bounc-

ers from the Jayhawker Saloon who were toting Utendorffer's limp shape around the corner of Postoak on a window shutter pallet, jail-bound.

"You—you've killed a man—so soon?" the girl asked in a shocked whisper.

"It's Fritz Utendorffer. Under arrest for threating a peace officer with violence, and for assaulting an officer."

Her amber eyes turned back to him.

"Daddy—wants me to tell you we will expect you for dinner at our home this evening at eight, Mr. Hollister. It's the house with the box elder tree in the front yard, on the corner of Kansas and Postoak."

Hollister bowed gravely.

"I regret I cannot accept the invitation," he said. "I start my first tour of the town at seven."

Abbey said urgently. "But the important citizens of the town want to—welcome you officially to Conestoga," she said. "It—it is sort of a command performance." She smiled. "By order of the Mayor."

He returned her smile. "In that case I accept with thanks."

The clock on the Stockman's Bank cornice started tolling the strokes of noon, reminding Hollister of important business that could no longer be deferred.

"I want you to know, Mr. Hollister," Abbey said hesitantly, "that I regret . . . the way I talked to you this morning. You have a job to do. I should not have let my—my personal feelings enter into the case. I was rude. I apologize."

Hollister said, "No apologies were expected, Miss Abbey. But thank you. I realize your opinion of me has not altered. Therefore your apology is doubly appreciated."

She turned then, picking up her skirts and hurrying back across the imaginary line which divided Conestoga Crossing into its halves of evil and virtue.

Some of the tension had left Gil Hollister as he continued his long march past the West Side deadfalls, to reach again the Kickapoo Saloon and his appointment with a man whom he knew to be his greatest personal threat in this job.

August Provart was standing on the Kickapoo porch, one shoulder point tilted against a scarred awning pillar as the marshal of Conestoga turned it off the walk, drawing from his pants pocket a massive brass padlock he had brought from the jail desk.

Provart was smiling as Hollister climbed the steps to halt before him. The big diamond gleamed like a train headlight.

"The place is all yours, marshal. Far be it from me to protest the inevitable process of the law."

Making no answer, Hollister walked up to the batwings, unhooked them, and closed the big hasp. Before locking the place he unfolded his closure notice, plucked tacks from a chewing tobacco sign on the board wall, and using the padlock for a hammer, affixed the sign which was, in effect, his one-man declaration of war against Conestoga's lawlessness.

Provart was lighting a cigar when Hollister finished padlocking the saloon and joined him at the top of the steps. He thought, Provart's taking this too easy. I'll have to watch my back. I'd rather he had put up a token protest.

"You poor, deluded damn' fool," the New Orleans tinhorn said softly, blowing on his nails and buffing them on his sleeve. "You strutting, fatheaded show-off. How long do you think I'll leave that lock on my door?"

Hollister shrugged. "You'll never unlock it, Sam Crullers. You should have stuck to swindling riverboat suckers."

"On what grounds are you locking me up? Other than old scores between us?" Provart persisted.

"You failed to report a dead man to the legally constituted authority of the town." Suddenly the marshal's voice roughened. "Hell, what are we wasting words about? I closed you out because you hired Buckshot Jim to ambush me. And now I'm giving you another deadline, Sam. If I catch you in this town after this hour tomorrow I'll kill you."

Provart shook his head. "Uh-uh. You're bluffing the wrong cookie, Hollister. This thing will be aired in the local court. You can't duck a test case. Can you prove my boys removed a dead man from these premises? I had Ames' carcass dug up this morning and moved to a safer grave. There were no witnesses."

Hollister said, "You won't be staying around town long enough to see your lawyer, Sam.

Provart answered casually, but with a forced bravado, "I won't have to, marshal. There will come a day, not far off, when the city fathers will be trying to replace you. When that day comes, a crowbar will take care of your padlock and the boys will be hoisting a toast to your memory—at my bar."

Hollister grinned, as if at some secret joke of his own.

"I'm going across the street to the Santa Fe telegraph office, Sam. Certain authorities in Memphis and New Orleans will be interested in the message I plan to put on the wire about you. I figure within twenty-four hours I will receive a telegram asking me to take you into custody pending an extradition warrant. Now do you see why you won't be around to join any toasts to my memory, Steamboat Sam Crullers?"

VIII

SUNDOWN'S LINGERING GLOW was still a ribbon of cerise along the flat Colorado horizon at ten o'clock when Aurora Overmile suggested that her guests leave the dining room and retire to the more comfortable lilac-screened porch for after-dinner liqueurs and cigars.

For Gil Hollister, the sumptuous dinner had been a study in contrasts. It was doubtful if the frontier held a more drab, sun-punished, depressingly isolated settlement than this stateline-straddling cowtown on the Cimarron; and yet Mayor and Mrs. Overmile had presided over a virtual banquet amid surroundings as lavish as would have been found in New York or Kansas City or New Orleans.

The table, set for ten, was part of a mahogany Duncan Phyfe suite which, during the course of the dinner, Aurora Overmile had mentioned as having been custom built for her family by the great furniture maker. It was covered with rich linen loomed in Ireland; the table had glittered with crystal and silver under the massive chandaliers worthy of any mansion.

Having arrived in Conestoga with his entire wardrobe packed in a cowboy's warbag, Hollister's simple garb suffered by contrast with the boiled shirts and Prince Albert coats affected by the other male guests.

If the marshal felt the difference in their social stations, he gave no outward sign of it. Throughout the dinner, no direct reference was made to his reason for being in Conestoga Crossing. The talk ran to random table conversation about beef prices, the possibility of a quarantine against Texas fever, the assassination of President Garfield and next year's election.

On these topics Hollister talked with the patent ease and fluent vocabulary of a man of more than average education and insight; and he sensed that his display of social graces, foreign though they were to the usual channels of his life as a lawman and rancher, had elevated him in Abbey's eyes.

The other guests invited to the Mayor's home were, as Hollister had anticipated, the members of the town council, and their wives. Pompous Dorr Pettigrew, owner of the town's principal mercantile store and chief of its volunteer fire brigade; Sol Saperstein, who ran the Bella Union Hotel; Lige McPheeters, proprietor of a thriving wagon freight business to outlying ranches; these men, under the leadership of bank president Claud Overmile, were the governing body of Conestoga.

If any business man or property owner on the ill-famed West Side had a seat on the town council, evidentally he did not rate a social invitation to Aurora Overmile's select circle. That angle lingered in Hollister's mind, for he judged that the bulk of Conestoga's population lived west of Stateline.

Of all the diners assembled at this table, Aurora Overmile was the one who most intrigued the marshal's interest. She was a strikingly beautiful woman in her middle thirties, dressed in a decollete gown of the latest New York mode. Throughout the dinner Aurora Overmile conducted herself with the gracious and charming ease of a born hostess; and yet there was an indefinable air of tenseness about her which Hollister was quick to observe.

He found himself wondering, does she know what happened between Fritz Utendorffer and me this morning? and again and again he pondered on the brief interchange of smiles and glances between

this charming, cultured woman and the self-professed leader of the West Side's demimonde.

As for Abbey, who had been seated at the opposite side of the table between Dorr Pettigrew and Sol Saperstein, Hollister maintained an aloof indifference that belied his roused interest in the girl and her history. Old Conway had hinted at a story back of her adoption into the banker's family; Hollister had overheard the girl telling a cattle buyer at the bank this morning that life on Overmile's cattle ranch was her preference above working in town as a bank clerk.

SAUNTERING out to the porch, cloyed with flowering lilacs and washed by a balmy midsummer breeze rich with the scent of the outlying prairies, Hollister found himself a wicker chair, purposely avoiding the porch swing where Abbey and her father seated themselves.

A negro maid was lighting candles in Chinese lanterns strung between the massive Doric pillars of the broad gallery, creating a soft glow which soon attracted swarms of insects. A man-servant, ostentatiously dressed as a butler for this occasion, passed among the guests serving creme de menthe and offering a humidor of fine Cuban cigars.

It was Sol Saperstein, owner of the Bella Union Hotel, who finally touched on the subject Hollister had been waiting for.

"It was a daring thing, Mister Hollister, your closing the notorious Kickapoo Casino today. May I ask your reason?"

Hollister found himself the focus of all eyes. Indistinct in the background he saw Abbey Overmile's full attention on him.

"A man was killed in Provart's private gambling rooms last night," the marshal said. "The killing was not reported to the coroner. As I understand it, that is grounds for padlocking the establishment."

Mayor Overmile, seated on the ornate railing of the gallery, leaned forward with sharp interest, his cigar coal glowing to the suction of his draw and putting a satanic pink stain on his doughy features.

"A killing? Why was the council not informed of it, marshal?"

Hollister studied the tip of his cigar, loathe to break the spell of this after-dinner hour with talk of violence. Across the night came the tinklings of a nickelodeon in some West Side deadfall; a run of hoofs and a whooping of cowboys as a Texas outfit stormed in from the direction of the river stockpens.

"I was not aware," Hollister said, "that I was expected to make reports to the council of what goes on across Stateline."

Dorr Pettigrew's nasal voice cut through the hum of insects clouding around the paper lanterns overhead, "But who was killed, and by whom, marshal?"

Hollister hesitated, and then said, "This is not a very suitable topic of conversation in the presence of the ladies, Mr. Pettigrew."

Pettigrew coughed and settled back in his wicker chair.

"You approve of the council's proposed methods of bringing law and order to this community, marshal?"

Hollister toyed with his liqueuer glass, reluctant to pursue this line of talk, but knowing it was the price of his being here tonight.

"Not entirely," he said bluntly. "For instance, I am expected to padlock every business concern which is the scene of a killing or other violence. That doesn't strike me as a very sensible way to go about taming a town—but you're paying me to carry out orders, so it shall be done."

Mayor Overmile sucked in an audible breath and said stiffly, "You would condone violence, marshal? You do not feel that it will prevent future violence to close up the scene of a previous murder?"

Hollister turned toward the banker. "Mr. Overmile, suppose a drunk came into your bank and shot down one of your staff. Should I lock up your establishment to prevent another similar occurrence?"

Overmile drew himself up stiffly. "Do you infer that my bank is in any way comparable to one of those unspeakable grogshops on the West Side?"

HOLLISTER LAUGHED softly. "Why are all the saloons on the other side of Stateline, gentlemen? You know why. Alcoholic beverages are outlawed in the State of Kansas. Otherwise you'd have saloons on the east side. It is not a question of your side of town being superior to the other. It is because of an

accident of geography and a variation in state laws concerning prohibition."

An awkward silence ensued. Hollister could tell by the shocked attitudes of the men's wives that he had outraged them by his frank appraisal of this town's social differences. He could not be sure, but he believed he heard a restrained giggle from Abbey Overmile's direction.

"Mr. Marshal, you should know that this city council's long-range plan is the complete closure of all gambling houses and saloons and . . . other nefarious establishments on the West Side," Claud Overmile broke the silence. "That is our purpose in depleting the municipal treasury to meet your exhorbitant salary demands. Before you are finished we hope to see the West Side turned into a ghost town. Is that clear?"

Hollister swung around to face the Conestoga mayor.

"No, it's not clear," the lawman said. "When the West Side is closed up, Conestoga Crossing is finished as a cattle shipping center. That is no concern of mine, but I should think it would be a concern of you gentlemen whose livelihood depends on the town's prosperity."

Aurora Overmile, seated under the direct shine of the Chinese lanterns so that the provocative curves of her mature figure were accentuated to the best advantage, spoke up with the air of a trained hostess smoothing troubled waters with the oil of diplomacy:

"The respectable element of Conestoga Crossing will take that gamble, Mr. Marshal. If—if it is not too personal, might I take advantage of my feminine prerogative of curiosity and ask how you happened to take up such a—shall we say, hazardous profession?"

Gil Hollister met his hostess' charming smile with a non-committal lift of his shoulders. Before he could speak Abbey said distinctly, "Five hundred dollars a month is big money, Mother. You can't ask a man to practise the business of shooting other men for much less, I should think."

Hollister exhaled a long plume of cigar smoke, his eyes staring off at the winking lights of Conestoga's houses.

"When I was fifteen," he said slowly, "I came up the trail from Texas with my father. That was in the days when Texas was under the heel of the Reconstructionists and an outfit had to fight its way across the Indian Nations to reach the Kansas markets. Kids in those days wore a gun on their hip as naturally as they play with kites today."

He swung his head around to stare directly at Abbey, sitting on one seat of the porch swing with her legs tucked up under her. It was as if his words were directed to her alone of this raptly attentive group.

"We sold our beef in a Kansas trail town," Hollister went on, his voice touched by the tragedy of old memories that had never left him, "and within an hour after Dad had cashed his vouchers he was stabbed in the back by a hoodlum who followed him out of a saloon. He died in my arms."

MRS. MCPHEETERS made properly sympathetic clucking sounds as she rocked her chair monotonously to the beat of her palm-leaf fan. In the white oval of Abbey's face, indistinctly seen in the dim light, Hollister thought he saw a more genuine sympathy growing in her eyes.

"I made a vow that night that my strength and my gun-savvy would be dedicated to bringing law to the West," Hollister said simply, without any hint of heroics. He turned back to Mrs. Overmile. "That is why I came by my reputation as a town-tamer, Mrs. Overmile. Not through any pleasure out of shooting men down and watching them kick. Because I hoped that my life might make the West a better place for my having lived in it . . . and to spare other younkers what I went through because I happened to be born in a time when the law was scarce this side of the Big Muddy."

In the following silence, the assembled guests heard a break of shots volley across the town, reminding them of the nearness of the violence which Gil Hollister was being paid to keep from encroaching beyond the deadline of Stateline Street.

Lige McPheeters cleared his throat loudly and said, "Mr. Hollister, I happened to be standing at the door of my warehouse this morning when you assaulted Fritz Utendorffer, apparently with-

out provocation. Would you care to elaborate on that—not," McPheeters hastened to add, "not that any of us here have any desire to defend that monster."

At the moment McPheeters was phrasing his question, Gil Hollister happened to be watching his hostess. At the mention of Fritz Utendorffer, he saw Aurora Overmile stiffen with a suddenness that spilled liqueur from her glass to stain the front of her low-cut gown.

"Utendorffer threatened me with death if I continued to carry out the council's policy of closing up west side saloons," Hollister said. "At this moment he is in jail. Judge McCardle will dispose of his case in the courtroom tomorrow morning, if you're interested in the details, Mr. McPheeters."

Hollister knew from the frozen posture of Aurora Overmile that his words had affected her profoundly, though she did not take her eyes off her lap. He believed this was the first the mayor's wife had heard of his brawl with the head of Conestoga's Saloon Owner's Association. Such news took time to penetrate the staid back streets of the respectable east side.

"Somebody's riding up, Daddy," Abbey Overmile cried out, and everyone on the porch turned to see an obscure figure in Stetson and bullhide chaps rein a Texas cow pony to a bucking halt just outside the Overmile's picket fence.

"The marshal here?" shouted the rider.

Hollister got to his feet and strode to the edge of the porch, senses rioting to a prescience of disaster shaping up.

"What's the trouble, son?"

The rider fought his circling horse back to the fence.

"Hell's broke loose over at the Jayhawker Saloon, marshal. Bunch of drunk Texicans from the Lazy R outfit are tearin' the place to pieces. Ike Tezrow wants to know why the town marshal ain't on the job."

Hollister's jaw hardened. Between two pulse beats he had stripped himself of the polite veneer of civilization and stood before the dinner guests as the grim fighting machine he was reputed to be.

"My thanks for a pleasant evening and a bountiful dinner, Mrs. Overmile," he said. "It looks like I'm needed on the other side of the big street. Where I belong."

IX

THE COWPUNCHER WHO HAD carried the message of tonight's trouble to the east side was galloping back toward Stateline as Hollister passed through the Overmile gate at a run, but not before the marshal had identified the Lazy R brand on the Texan's pony.

Lazy R was behind the ruckus at the Jayhawker; and it was obvious that this was a set-up job. Lazy R, who had come up the trail this afternoon and bedded a pool herd on the flats across the river pending their turn at the Conestoga shipping pens, must have heard that a new marshal was planning to make the town rough on any Texan he caught with a belly full of steam and a hankering to shoot out a few window lights.

This was a test, on which his own standing in Conestoga depended. It had come less than twenty-four hours after he had donned the star in this town. On the outcome of how he handled things at the Jayhawk tonight would depend the future behavior of trouble-hunting drovers coming up the Chisholm Trail.

Reaching the corner of Postoak and Stateline, Hollister slowed to a walk. The keen edge was off his nerves, due to the heavy dinner he had consumed; he did not feel the usual lift that threat of physical violence had brought to him in the past.

Kerosene torches put a red flare on the street in front of the Jayhawker Saloon. Hollister stripped off his brown coat to clear his six-guns for action, tossing the garment over a hitch rack in front of McPheeter's Wagon Freight office.

He was crossing the street, his ears tuned to the pandemonium of breaking glass and splintering furniture inside the saloon, when he saw the peglegged figure of Colonel Conway hobbling toward him.

"You're buckin' a stacked deck ifn you go in thar, boss!" the old Gettysburg veteran panted, grabbing Hollister by the arm. "It's a put-up job. This Texas outfit come into town loaded for bear, aimin' to draw you into a one-sided brawl. You're a fool if you don't deppitize a dozen fellers and arm 'em with buckshot guns—"

Hollister shook Conway's craggy paw off his sleeve and strode up the saloon steps. The batwings flew open and a man

clad in the apron of a roulette wheel operator came sprawling onto the porch, bruised and battered from the pummeling he had received.

Hollister helped the croupier to his feet and demanded harshly, "What's going on in there? What started it?"

The roulette man spotted the star on Hollister's vest and seemed to drink strength from the sight of it.

"Hell—to pay, marshal. This Texas bunch was drunk when they come in. Started askin' when the new marshal was due on his night rounds. Then the ramrod came over to my layout and shot hell out of the wheel. Claimed it was crooked. The skunk never even put down a bet to give it a try."

HOLLISTER glanced around at Conway, nodding to himself. It was a familiar story. A bunch of trail drovers, weeks away from liquor and women and a game of poker, spoiling for trouble and wanting to work off the boredom of their dusty miles hazing cattle up the line.

"I'll back yore play, boss," Conway said, his heart not in it. "I ain't due to go on duty till midnight, but—"

Hollister cut in, "I have a hunch Utendorffer is back of this. Tipped off one of his flunkies to ride out to Lazy R's camp and trump up a little rukus for me to cool down. You stay out of it, Colonel."

Gil Hollister stepped through the batwings, thumbs hooked over shell belts, his entrance not immediately noticed in the shambles of this barroom.

A dozen-odd cowpunchers were systematically wrecking the place. The long mirror behind the bar was spiderwebbed with bullet holes and the floor was swimming with whiskey from smashed bottles and broken kegs.

Scared-looking bartenders had taken refuge behind sawed-off shotguns in the alley back of the bar, afraid to do anything to prevent the wanton destruction of their house. The Lazy R punchers were at the moment engaged in upsetting poker tables, chuck-a-luck cages, faro layouts and other gambling equipment. One burly Texan had grabbed a fire axe from a wall rack and was gleefully smashing a nickelodeon to kindling wood.

Most of the Jayhawker's patrons had escaped the scene by the side windows; Hollister vaguely remembered seeing the crowd massed outdoors at the far edge of the saloon's torchlight.

Dominating the center of the barroom was a swaggering giant in apron-length *armitas* chaps and a ten-gallon sombrero. He had a whiskey bottle in one hand and a Remington six-gun in the other, and between swigs he was exhorting his buckaroos to do a thorough job of putting the Jayhawker out of business.

Hollister slipped his twin Peacemakers from holsters and taking careful aim, drove a bullet through the brown bottle in the big Texan's hand. The crash of the exploding .44 brought a complete halt to the destruction, whipped the roistering trail drivers around to face the batwings.

"The law has arrived, boys!" whooped the Lazy R giant, thrusting his Remington into the waistband of his chaps and dropping the shattered bottleneck out of his other hand. "Hold yore dallies, men, while I check into these nasty rumors we been hearin' about this Hollister *cabrone*."

The marshal of Conestoga Crossing stood where he was, six-gun muzzles jutting at hip level to cover the Lazy R crew. Most of the punchers wore the slack-lipped grins of men well on their way to being slobbering drunk; but the menace of the guns held by this man with the star brought a measure of quiet to the room.

"I'm Brazos Billings, ramrod of the best damn' brush-poppin' *brasada* lobos this side of the Rio, marshal," the leader of the faction announced, heading toward Hollister. "You don't remember me, Hollister, but I'm the feller you gun-whipped in Prairie Junction for wingin' a floozy. When I heard you were runnin' Conestoga I knew my luck had changed for the better."

Hollister waited until Billings was within two paces of him before thumbing back the hammers of his matched Colts.

"I remember you well enough, Billings," the marshal said. He glanced over toward the bar, recognizing the saloonkeeper who had called him Lord Hollister this morning on the occasion of his meeting with Fritz Utendorffer. "If you own this woodpile, come on out," he ordered the man. "What's your side of this?"

THE OWNER of the Jayhawker Saloon came timidly around the end of the bar. He leveled a shaking finger at Brazos Billings.

"These hell-raisin' rebels jumped my place in order to call your bluff, marshal," the man fumed. "They got no quarrel with me. I don't allow loaded dice or crooked wheels or marked cards in my place. This whole business is a frame-up to draw you in here."

Hollister kept his eyes ranging over the grinning Lazy R punchers who were slowly arraying themselves in a bunch in the middle of the room, waiting to see what shape events would take when their ramrod called for a showdown.

"You're Ike Tezrow?" Hollister asked the trembling saloon man.

"That's right."

"If you're worried about me locking up this place on account of something that happened beyond your control," Hollister said levelly, "forget it. Start tallying up the damages. Lazy R will find out that this kind of fun is expensive."

The hostility slowly faded from Ike Tezrow's gaunt face as he picked over Hollister's reassuring words in his mind. But the marshal had put Tezrow out of his mind.

"Billings," he said, "you sold a beef herd, or you've got a beef herd you aim to sell. Right?"

The Lazy R boss dragged a sleeve across his mouth. He had been keyed up for a knock-down, drag-out brawl with this star-toter; now he got the first inkling that the play was being taken away from him, by a man who faced ten-to-one odds.

"Wait a minute, Hollister. If you think you're goin' to attach my beef receipts to pay damages to Tezrow—"

"That's exactly what you're going to do, son."

Billings swallowed hard. "You damn sheepherder, you'll hear why we picked out this sucker trap for wreckin' before you talk so high and mighty," he blustered. "Last year, my cavvy wrangler got a Mickey Finn in his beer in this place and woke up in the back alley with a busted head and his poke missing. The year before that Tezrow's card sharps cleaned out most of my boys with their stacked decks. You think I ain't got a right to haul Tezrow's roof down over his ears?"

From the sidelines Ike Tezrow protested lamely, "It's a damn' lie, marshal. I run an honest house here. I tell you, Billings heard about you keepin' the Texas boys from havin' their fun in Conestoga an'—"

"Shut up," Hollister cut in. "Billings, you and your boys belly up to the bar with your hands up."

Billings retreated a step before the menace of Hollister's leveled guns.

"The hell!" he broke out, rashness crowding him hard. "You ain't juggin' my boys, not ever. You don't cut that wide a splash, marshal—"

As he spoke, Billings' right hand jabbed for the Remington he had thrust under his belt. His draw ended in a misfire when the front sight caught on his shirt-tail, but his intent was there, and Gil Hollister took a quick step to his left before triggering a slug through Billings' forearm, the bullet ripping through bone and muscle to puncture a wall lamp at the far end of the room.

BILLINGS fell to his knees, sick with bullet shock. Past him, Hollister saw the Lazy R punchers break out of their huddle and scramble over each other to reach the bar, their arms lifted ceilingward.

"Get their guns and put 'em in a box, Tezrow," Hollister ordered the saloon owner, ignoring the vomiting figure of Brazos Billings at his feet.

The Lazy R crew, loaded to the hilt with bad intentions a moment before, made no effort to resist as Tezrow, augmented by his shotgun-toting house men, made a quick business of collecting their belt weapons.

Hollister took possession of Billings' six-shooter and, circling the wounded Texan, walked over to confront the shivering line of Lazy R men at the bar.

"Turn around."

When the Texans were facing him, Hollister singled out the lantern-jawed rider who had summoned him from the mayor's dinner party.

"You boys got a herd of steers to get into the shipping pens," Hollister said. "I don't propose to have you miss your consignment of cars. When are you due to

load?"

One puncher, a pock-marked halfbreed, said hoarsely, "Our cars are on the sidin' now, Senor Marshal."

Hollister nodded.

"Get out of here and fog your broncs back to your chuckwagon, then. I'll see that Billings is on hand tomorrow to collect the cash that's coming to him and make arrangements to reimburse this saloon for the damage you committed during your little jamboree."

The rider who had brought him to this showdown at the Jayhawker licked his lips and tarried behind as his fellow punchers filed out.

"You're a square-shooter, Hollister. You won't have to worry about us ganging up with one of the other outfits and coming back to measure you for a coffin."

Hollister acknowledged the puncher's tribute with a tip of his head.

When the saloon was cleared of the Texans, men who had witnessed this byplay from the windows began gathering in the doorway, staring at the groveling figure of Billings, clutching his bullet-shattered arm.

"This place is closed for the night," Hollister called out. "But it will reopen as soon as Tezrow has completed his repairs. Tezrow, turn down your light and lock up."

Tezrow, carrying a whiskey case in which he had assembled the shooting irons of Billings' crew, shuffled up to where Hollister was helping the Lazy R boss to his feet. Tezrow said, "Hollister, I reckon I had you figgered wrong. After what you done to Utendorffer in front of my place this mornin', I figgered along with the rest of us on the West Side that you aimed to ruin us all. I won't forget the deal you give me tonight."

A brief grin broke the taut fixture of Hollister's lips.

He was staring at the front doorway, where Colonel Conway, wearing his night marshal's badge prominent on his sergeant's shirt, was peglegging into the wrecked barroom.

"Fetch a medico over to the jail to take care of Billings," Hollister ordered the old man. "The way things are going we might as well call that *calabozo* a hospital."

IT WAS nearing midnight and the end of Gil Hollister's first day as marshal of Conestoga Crossing when he unlocked the bullpen door to let the town doctor leave. The two prisoners on Hollister's books, Billings and Utendorffer, were both lying on their cots, each with one arm reposing in a sling.

"You certainly specialize in wingin' people, marshal," the medico commented with dry humor. "Mr. Utendorffer is under opiates, but he'll be ready to appear in court tomorrow."

Hollister bade the doctor good-night and turned to where Colonel Conway was storing the guns of the Lazy R cowboys in the wall cabinet.

"Well, Colonel," Hollister said wearily, feeling the first hint of let-down as he reached the end of his shift, "the town's yours. I'll be in Room 7 at the Trail House if you need me."

Leaving the jail, Hollister retraced his steps to the rack in front of McPheeters' warehouse, retrieved his coat, and headed down the west side of Stateline bound for his hotel.

What had happened to the Texas rowdies in the Jayhawker tonight would soon become range gossip from here to the Rio Grande. "They're turning Conestoga into a graveyard after sundown." If Hollister knew his Texans—and being one of them, he believed he did—before long this town would find itself blacklisted by north-bound outfits.

If that feeling spread, it could amount to a boycott that would foredoom this town's existence as a shipping center. It would be too easy for Texas outfits to push their beef a few miles up the railroad for the next point west—Fremont Tanks. Their trade would boom the Tanks, leaving Conestoga to die on the vine. It had happened before; it could happen again. Texans liked their fun. If they couldn't get it at Conestoga they could get it elsewhere.

A lone figure moving down the deserted street, Hollister reviewed his warning to Overmile and the other bigwigs at Aurora's dinner party. They wanted the town closed up to the last saloon, cardroom and red-light house. Did they think the East Side could survive without the West?

"It's none of my affair if that's the way

they want it," Hollister commented half aloud. "But there's something going on under the surface that I'm not wise to—"

He broke off, sensing rather than seeing the figure waiting in the clotted shadows alongside the Trail's End Hotel.

Someone called his name as Hollister's hand dropped instinctively to gun handle. Halting, every nerve fine-drawn in readiness for trouble, Hollister recognized the man who stepped forward to face him as Joe Smith, one of the Santa Fe railroad bums he had released from the jail woodyard this morning.

"Marshal, there's something you ought to know," the bum whispered. "A man offered me five hundred dollars to cash in your chips today. Your brush with that Utendorffer hombre made you a pack of enemies."

"I expect it did," Hollister admitted. "Part of my job. Who made this offer?"

"Don't know his name," Smith went on, glancing furtively up and down the street. "I turned it down because I'm in yore debt. But that hombre will find somebody who'll take the job."

Hollister nodded, wondering how sober Smith was.

"The deal is this," Smith went on. "When you go into your hotel room—not tonight, tomorrow night—watch out. Utendorffer owns this hotel. Maybe that's why his amigos aim to cut you down while you're asleep. Tomorrow night's when the trap is supposed to be sprung. Take it or leave it, marshal."

Before Hollister could thank his informant, Joe Smith had vanished in the night. The marshal was never to see him again.

X

UTENDORFFER'S PRELIMINary hearing was set for ten o'clock. At nine-thirty, having downed only a cup of coffee for breakfast because the night clerk had failed to waken him at seven, Gil Hollister arrived at the jailhouse to find his night marshal, old Conway, sound asleep in the front office as usual.

Entering the bull pen, Hollister found his two prisoners, Utendorffer and the Lazy R trail boss, Brazos Billings, cleaning up the remains of the breakfasts Conway had brought them.

Utendorffer greeted his jailer with a stony insolence that told Hollister something of the hatred he had instilled in this domineering German. But his attention was on Brazos Billings. Knowing Texans, he was not surprised to see the Lazy R boss grinning through the bars.

"Thanks, marshal," Billings drawled.

"Thanks for what?"

"You could have punched my ticket last night when my draw snagged in my harness. Why didn't you?"

Hollister unlocked Billings' cell and beckoned the rancher outside. Billings' right arm was splinted and hanging in a sling fashioned out of a flour sack.

"You were more than a little drunk, Billings. Smashing up a saloon is no justification for killing a man."

Billings' left hand was fiddling with the cardboard disk of his tobacco sack. Hollister reached in the man's pocket, rolled him a brown-paper cigarette, lighted it and stuck it in the rancher's mouth.

"Thanks. What happens next, marshal?"

Hollister said, "Your crew is busy pushing your trail herd into the pens. Better get down there and collect what you've got coming. I'm lodging no charges against you for what happened last night. So long as you make amends with Tezrow."

The Lazy R boss eyed Hollister for a long moment, blue smoke forking from his nostrils.

"I'll settle up with Tezrow as soon as I've cashed my voucher, marshal. How badly did we muss up the Jayhawker?"

Hollister accompanied the Texan out to the front office, where he unlocked the gun cabinet and brought out the box of shooting irons belonging to Billing's crew. Billings tucked the heavy box under his good arm.

"Tezrow thinks five hundred will buy him a new backbar glass and repair his gambling equipment. The figure seems conservative enough."

Billings nodded, heading toward the door.

"A fair price for an evening's fun ... What I said last night about my boys getting cold-decked in the Jayhawker still goes, marshal. Tezrow's games are crooked from hell to breakfast."

Hollister grinned, making no comment.

Outside the door, Billings turned to face Hollister.

"Marshal, I can't keep my boys from talking to outfits they meet on the road home. I think Conestoga is going to miss the Lone Star trade. The day may come when Tezrow will wonder if it was worth making an issue of what happened last night."

HOLLISTER SHRUGGED, not caring to admit that he felt the same way about the town council's reform program. He had no special interest in what happened to Conestoga's future.

"Well, *hasta la vista,* marshal," Billings said cheerfully. "I hope you don't have to tame any more of us hellions. You run through the luck of a lifetime, facing my boys last night."

When Billings had left, Hollister returned to the bullpen and notified Utendorffer of his appointment with the judge.

Arriving at the courthouse with his prisoner, Hollister found Judge McArdle's courtroom crowded with townspeople, including Mayor Overmile, McPheeters and Saperstein, a sizeable delegation of honky-tonk girls—which came as a surprise to Hollister, seeing as how Conestoga's tarnished feminine population rarely were seen abroad in daylight hours—and a smattering of Texas trail drovers, saloon owners and curiosity-seeking barflies.

Utendorffer's attorney was on hand to represent his client. The legal proceedings were soon dispensed with, to the disappointment of most of the spectators behind the railed-off enclosure, who had come expecting a dramatic clash between their new town-taming marshal and the West Side's most prominent citizen.

Within ten minutes, Fritz Utendorffer was free on $1,000 cash bail, the date of his jury trial set for one month later, on charges of resisting arrest and threatening a peace officer with bodily violence.

Later, joining the judge in his private chambers, Gil Hollister listened to McArdle's private opinion:

"A lot can happen in thirty days, marshal. I don't expect Utendorffer to jump bail or anything like that. Frankly, I don't think Utendorffer's henchmen will let you appear in court to testify against their chief."

Remembering what Joe Smith had said about an attempt on his life this following night, Hollister nodded agreement.

"It'll probably boil down to a matter of his word against mine, Your Honor," Hollister said. "There were plenty of witnesses who saw Utendorffer draw first, but they won't be around to testify. I realize that."

Judge McArdle waggled his bald head somberly.

"I don't envy you your job, Hollister. Cleaning up this town is beyond the limits of any one man's efforts. Suffice it to say that I will back you to the limit of the law. The joker in the deck will be your jury.

"The prosecuting attorney will exhaust his allowable challenges, of course, but when we finally get twelve good men and true on the panel, I'd wager half of them will have Utendorffer's bribes in their pockets and the other half will be afraid to oppose an acquittal."

Hollister left the courthouse and returned to the jail office, intending to spend what was left of the morning in putting his predecessor's desk in order. He was startled to find Colonel Conway chatting with an extravagantly dressed woman in a scarlet gown and matching parasol. She wore a glittering monocle over her left eye.

"Good morning, Marshal," the woman drawled in a hard, cynical voice that went with her over-roughed cheeks and painted mouth.

"I knew you'd be over to Cimarron street to see me sooner or later, so I thought I'd save you the trip. I am Madam Katherine Stengel, colloquially known as One Eye Kate. No doubt the stuffed-shirt boys on the city council have mentioned me."

Hollister doffed his Stetson and shook hands with this notorious *fille de joie.* On the far side of forty, One-Eye Kate was beginning to turn fleshy, but the ghost of a former beauty still remained in the delicate modeling of her facial bones and in the limpid depths of her hazel eyes.

Turning to the night marshal, the courtesan tossed her henna-dyed head and said brusquely, "Get out, Jeb, and finish your nap elsewhere. The marshal and I want to get acquainted."

JEB CONWAY made a snorting sound, picked up his delapidated campaign hat and peglegged out of the jail office. Hollister seated himself in the chair recently vacated by Conway and turned an appraising glance at his visitor.

"I appreciate your dropping around for a pow-wow, Kate," he said respectfully. "Yes, I've heard of you."

One-Eyed Kate stripped off a glove, removed the monocle from her eye and polished it on the bosom of her basque.

"The distinguished Mayor Overmile has listed me as an undesirable character, I presume?"

Hollister grinned. "Something like that, yes."

Madam Stengel restored the lens to her eye and gave Hollister a penetrating scowl.

"Put your cards on the table, Marshal," she said. "You have orders to close my houses on Cimarron Street?"

Hollister rubbed his unshaven jaw thoughtfully.

"As long as Conestoga remains a cattle shipping town, I am ready to concede that there is a—shall we say, a need?—for your establishments," he said carefully. "I didn't come here to sling stones at you or your girls, Kate."

The woman smiled bitterly. "If we weren't here, I wonder how safe the girls on the East Side would be?"

Hollister nodded. "I grant you that. Suppose we put it this way: the other side of Stateline is out of bounds to the girls on your payroll, Kate. Not because your professionals are in any way inferior to the run of amateur libertines one always finds in a town divided as this one. Just because that is the best way to avoid unnecessary trouble."

Hollister could tell from the way Kate Stengel's mouth was twitching that she had something on her mind but could not bring herself to discuss it.

"You think I get a rake-off on all the business of Cimarron Street," she said. "Well, I do. I'm a Madam and there is no reason why I should be ashamed to admit it. What you don't know, Marshal, is that one third of our—uh, income—winds up in the bank account of an East Side citizen who wouldn't deign to tip his hat to one of my girls if he met her on the street."

Hollister leaned forward, his pulses racing.

"I didn't know that," he said. "An East Sider gets a rake-off from Cimarron Street? What does he provide in return?"

One-Eye Kate shrugged. "That is the price we pay to keep operating, marshal."

"You won't divulge the name of this leech?"

She shook her head. "Why should I tell tales? What I want to know, Marshal, is where we stand with you. You've padlocked Provart's saloon. You've dragged Fritz Utendorffer before the bar of justice. Quite a big splash for your first day on Stateline Street. The question is, how soon will you move one block west and start padlocking my houses?"

Hollister leaned back in his chair, more shaken than he cared to admit by One-Eye Kate's disclosure.

"I will let Cimarron Street run its own affairs," he said levelly, "until such time as some customer of yours comes to me with a complaint that he was drugged and robbed."

Kate Stengel got to her feet, drawing on her gloves and opening her petite silk parasol.

"You'll do to ride the river with, Marshal," she said, flashing him a warm smile. "Looking at you makes me wish I was twenty years younger . . ."

SHE STARED at him intently for a moment, and then said, "Marshall, I think Conestoga Crossing has passed its peak. Do you know what I will do if business—declines?"

Hollister laughed. "You've probably salted away enough to buy yourself a villa on the French Riviera, Madam."

One-Eye Kate shook her head. "I'll tell you what I will do. I will move my girls lock, stock and barrel to Fremont Tanks. And why will I do that? Because when Conestoga Crossing ceases to attract the Texas trade, that's where the shipping pens will move to. It's in the cards, Marshal. Think it over. For every saloon you padlocked in this town, two will open their doors in the Tanks. Think it over, Marshal."

One-Eyed Kate was gone, leaving only the aroma of her expensive cologne.

Through the side window of the office Hollister saw the queen of Cimarron Street move with hip-swinging hauteur down Postoak toward her side of town.

Her visit left Hollister oddly disturbed. His own doubts and wonderings had been directed into more concrete channels by the vague hints One-Eye Kate had left behind her; he found himself wondering if the mysterious "protector" of Cimarron Street who was waxing rich on the illicit tribute he exacted from the West Side jezebels might have been seated at the table of Aurora Ovrmile last night . . .

Shortly before noon Colonel Jeb Conway stumped into the office, ostensibly to hang up his gun at the end of another tour of duty.

Hollister said, "Colonel, when does the next train west go through Conestoga?"

Conway scowled. "The local passenger between Satanta an' Springfield stops here for water at twelve-nineteen. Why? Fixin' to leave town already?"

The marshal grinned. "No. You are. I want you to run a little errand for me over to Fremont Tanks. How far's that?"

"Fremont Tanks? Twenty mile as the crow flies. Train makes it in an hour. Why should I miss my sleep to run over to that prairie-dawg town?"

Hollister waved Conway into a chair. "You owe me a few hours' time," he rebuked the oldster, "for the shut-eye you take in this office every morning." When Conway started to make an indignant protest, Hollister went on sharply, "I've never been to Fremont Tanks. What's it like?"

Mollified, Conway settled back in his chair.

"The Santy Fee has some shops an' a division p'int there. McPheeters has a branch warehouse for his freightin' outfit. The stage line keeps its relay hosses at the Tanks."

"What building's? How many people live there?"

Conway scratched his shaggy jaw. "Fifty-odd, mebbe. One saloon. A tradin' post. And a courthouse. Fremont Tanks wouldn't be a dot on the map ifn it wasn't the county seat."

Hollister scanned the wall map of Colorado pinned above his desk.

"Arroyo County," he mused. "This half of Conestoga is in Arroyo County, Colorado, isn't it?"

"That's right. The sheriff in Fremont Tanks used to have a deputy here in town, until the West Side got too rough to handle. Seein' as how the town council comes from the East Side, the sheriff said it was up to the Kansas authorities to keep law an' order this side o' Stateline Street."

Hollister got to his feet and put on his Stetson.

"Come on," he said. "I'm putting you on the 12:19, Colonel. I want you to visit the recorder's office in Fremont Tanks and find out something for me that may turn this town upside down."

XI

CONWAY, AWARE NOW THAT his forthcoming mission west was something Hollister deemed important, shrugged off his morning sourness and fell in step with the marshal as they headed up Postoak toward the main stem.

"What sort of information, boss?" the old man asked.

Reaching Stateline, Hollister turned south toward the railroad station. In the distance, across the river, he could see the feather of smoke indicating the approach of the Satanta-Springfield local, highballing in from the north.

"I want you to copy the names of the principal land owners who have title to any lots in the platted townsite of Fremont Tanks and the immediate vicinity," Hollister said. "Get hold of a copy of the town's plat if you can, and write the names on the lots for me. Especially the dates when this land last changed ownership."

Conway's wooden leg made its rhythmic thumping sound on the plank walk as he hurried to keep pace with Hollister's reaching stride.

"How long you givin' me to do this, boss?"

"You'll be in the Tanks before two o'clock. The courthouse will close at six. The town isn't subdivided so heavily that you couldn't be back tomorrow, Conway."

Passing the locked-up front of the Kickapoo Casino, Hollister was reminded of the deadline, already several minutes expired, which he had given August Provart to get out of town. That business occupied his mind as they walked over to the

Sante Fe station, where Hollister bought his night marshal a round-trip ticket to Fremont Tanks.

"What's back o' this business, boss?" Conway inquired, tugging at Hollister's sleeve. "I don't cotton to workin' blind. What's the deal?"

Hollister walked to the far end of the platform to get out of earshot of the Conestoga postmaster waiting to take the mailbags from the approaching 12:19 local and several bystanders on hand to see the train go through town.

"I can't answer that, Conway," he said frankly.

The oldster bristled. "Don't trust me? Then by grab you can tear up your ticket—"

"No, no." Hollister said quickly. "I'd trust you till hell freezes over, Colonel. The thing is, I don't rightly know why I want that information. Call it a hunch. The information you bring back may not tell me a thing. On the other hand, maybe it'll uncover something that One-Eye Kate hinted at. In which case I may resign my star and pass up Conestoga Crossing as a town I don't want any part of."

The diamond-stacked locomotive rushed past them with a hiss of steam and a stench of hot lubricating oil. When it grated to a stop with a screech of brakeshoes and clattering drawbars and couplers, Hollister walked up to the nearest daycoach to see his emissary aboard.

"Don't answer any questions," he cautioned Conway. "The recorder can't refuse to let you look at public records. What you're after is nobody's business. Savvy?"

CONWAY WINKED conspiratorially and reached for the grab rail of the coach platform. In the act of shaking Hollister's hand the old timer tensed suddenly, staring past Hollister.

Turning, Hollister was in time to see August Provart, carrying two heavily-loaded carpetbags, emerge from the Santa Fe waiting room and head straight toward him.

The diamond in the gambler's teeth flashed in the sun as Provart elbowed past Conway and mounted the platform steps of the daycoach. Setting down his luggage, Provart said softly, "I've got a brother who runs a grogshop on San Francisco's Barbary Coast, marshal. If you want me you'll have to take a *pasear* out to California. Good-bye."

When Provart vanished inside the coach Conway swung aboard and chuckled, "The first rat has deserted the sinkin' ship. Well, so long till *manana*, boss."

As the train pulled out, taking with it the riverboat gambler who had tried to cut his throat long years before, Hollister found no satisfaction in the thought that Provart had bowed to his ultimatum of yesterday. Provart's farewell had been a bit too glib, too informative. Was he actually bound for California? If so, why had he divulged his destination?

Conway's remark about the first rat deserting the sinking ship lingered in Hollister's mind as he turned back up Stateline. Did the old night marshal sense the beginning of the end for Conestoga Crossing? Had the town council imported him from his Wyoming retirement to write the epitaph for a flourishing cattle-shipping center? Who wanted this cowtown destroyed? The information old Conway might find buried in the archives of the next county seat west might supply a clue to those questions.

Preoccupied with his wonderment about where he fitted into the destiny of Conestoga, Gil Hollister turned in at the elite Sunflower Restaurant, took a table at the window where he could keep an eye on Stateline Street during its dormant midday hour, and ordered a meal.

The waitress, smartly frocked in contrast to the slovenly girl at the Drover's Cafe across the street, took his order and brought his silver and drinking water with a deference which told Hollister that he was already a celebrity even in the eyes of the East Side's working class.

He was waiting for the chef to prepare his steak when the waitress brought him a copy of the cowtown's weekly newspaper, the Conestoga Crossing *Spectator*. Without comment the girl opened the four-page sheet to the editorial columns and placed it beside his plate.

Hollister turned to page one. The local editor had splashed a three-column headline over a story concerning the closure of Provart's gambling house and Utendorffer's arrest, together with last night's

sensational events at the Jayhawker Saloon:

GILBERT HOLLISTER, CONESTOGA'S NEW MARSHAL, OFF TO SENSATIONAL START IN CIVIC CLEAN-UP!

The following news story covered the high-lights of Hollister's first day behind the star, and then went on to bring its readers up to date on their new marshal's previous record as a town-taming lawman, dwelling at length on his exploits in Abilene, Salt Center, and Prairie Junction.

At the conclusion of the article, the *Spectator* writer suggested that the reader refer to the lead editorial on Page Three.

HOLLISTER turned to the indicated page, remembering that the waitress had tacitly pointed it out for his attention, and read a jumble of hand-set type which the compositor must have spent the wee hours of the morning readying for the press:

MARSHAL HOLLISTER—SAVIOR OR DESTROYER?

As noted elsewhere on these pages Marshal Gilbert Hollister has made tremendous strides in his first day as Conestoga's keeper of the peace. Uneasy must be the hearts of business men on the west side of our community, as they see the accomplished fact of what a determined lawman can do toward ending the lawlessness which for too long has flowered in the evil purlieus of the town bounded by the railroad, Stateline, Postoak and Cimarron Streets.

The question is, where will all this reform lead? Conestoga Crossing owes its existence to its being the principal terminus of the Chisolm Trail, the shipping center for cattle driven north from Texas.

The closing of saloons, gambling halls, and other establishments catering to the appetites of free-spending cattle drovers cannot help but tend to drive this revenue away from our city. Without the shipping pens, where would Conestoga Crossing be? The surrounding country is too sparsely settled to support the honest businessmen as exemplified by the establishments on the East Side.

Can Conestoga lose its West Side and continue to exist? The Spectator doubts that it can. Yet the city council, through its spokesman Mayor Overmile, (as reported on Page 2), has embarked upon a ruthless campaign of civic reform, aimed at converting our West Side into a "ghost town", with Marshal Gilbert Hollister as the instrument of this overwhelming social revolution.

This newspaper does not condone outlawry. It does feel a responsibility toward the city's future. The Spectator feels that the city council should temper its righteous zeal with common sense. No man doubts Mr. Hollister's personal courage, integrity of purpose, or responsibility to carry out the council's orders. But is a town-taming marshal the answer to our problems? How far should the law be permitted to go? This editor has not succeeded in finding out why the Kickapoo Casino was padlocked. There seems evidence to point toward a personal enmity between our new marshal and Mr. Provart as the sole basis for this closure. If this be true, then the redoubtable Mr. Hollister is overstepping his authority. Conestoga Crossing may one day wake up to find itself devoid of whiskey, high-stake poker and commercialized love. It may also wake up to find a prosperous community relegated to the limbo of a bankrupt tank stop on the Santa Fe branch line.

The editorial was signed by one Matthew Sedgewick, presumably the editor and publisher of the weekly.

Laying the paper aside, Hollister thought, I'll have to look up this Sedgewick hombre. If his printshop is on the East Side, the man has guts. He doesn't toady to Mayor Overmile, that's for certain . . .

The waitress brought his meal, returning his grin with a tight-lipped reserve which told Hollister that he was already being looked upon as the potential destroyer of Conestoga Crossing. He was attacking his thick beefsteak when he became aware of someone standing at his side, clearing his throat to catch his attention.

Glancing up, Hollister recognized the tall, dignified Negro who had waited on the mayor's table last night.

"Mistuh Hollistuh, suh?"

"Yes."

The negro shifted his feet. Sweat bead-

ed the man's coffee-dark forehead. Obviously the Overmile butler was embarked on a mission he found exceeding difficult to accomplish.

"Ah have a confidential message fo' yo' attention, suh," the negro said, twisting a suppliant cap. "A mos' confidential message, suh."

Hollister laid down his knife and fork. "Let's have it, son."

The negro rummaged in a pocket and produced a tightly-folded sheet of paper. Taking it from the butler's trembling hand, Hollister lifted the lilac-colored missive to his nose, readily identifying the subtle fragrance it held as matching Aurora Overmile's perfume.

He unfolded the paper and saw a brief message in a neat feminine hand:

> I must see you. The situation is getting unendurable. I will meet you at the cottonwoods by the creek at moonrise this evening. Don't fail me. I am completely desperate.

The note was unsigned, but it was obviously from Aurora Overmile, the mayor's wife.

THE BUTLER reached for the paper, taking it out of Hollister's hand. The marshal scowled at this impertinence, and then the thought occurred to him that his mistress might have ordered her butler to keep the paper in his posession.

"Who wrote this?" Hollister dedmanded.

"Missus Obermile, suh."

Hollister twisted around in his chair, reaching out to seize the negro's arm as he started to leave.

"One minute, son. Have you read this message?"

After a moment's hesitation, the negro nodded. "My lady gabe me puhmission to do so, suh."

Hollister thought, "Something fishy about this," but aloud he said, "I'm a stranger here. The river is lined with cottonwoods. Which ones does Mrs. Overmile refer to?"

The negro glanced around the dining room and then bent down to whisper confidentially, "She means de cottonwood trees weah Pipestone Crick empties into de Cimahron, sub. Dat is about fibe mile along de ribbuh, on de Mayah's Slash O Ranch, Mistuh Marshall."

Confusion grew in Hollister's mind. Why should the social leader of the East Side want a clandestine meeting with him, so far from town? To what "unendurable situation" did Aurora Overmile refer?

"Ah would suggest, suh," the butler went on, "dat you leabe town on de Q.T. De Mayuh is a very jealous man, suh. You onderstand, Mistuh Mahshall?"

Hollister nodded, although understanding was the furthest thing from his mind at this moment. Long trained to trouble, he had an underlying feeling that this could be a trap of some kind. And yet . . . the message had surely been written by Aurora Overmile, on her personal stationery. If she did not want to be seen conferring with the marshal her husband had imported to Conestoga Crossing, it was logical that she should choose a rendezvous outside of town. Her husband's Slash O ranch was a logical choice for such a meeting.

"How do I reach Overmile's spread?" Hollister asked.

The negro made a gesture. "Follow de ribbuh wes', suh, an' cross a bobwiah fence. Dat is de Slash O boundary. You will see de ranch houses an' bahns on yo' lef'. Pipestone Crick runs into de Cimarron about a mile from de ranch."

Hollister said firmly, "Give me that note. If it was intended for me, I want it."

The negro shook his head adamantly.

"My lady, she say, burn up de papuh as soon as de marshal read it, Gawge, she say to me."

"Does she expect a reply?"

The butler shook his head negatively. "My lady has already lef' town, suh. She an' Miss Abbey, dey ride out to de ranch dis mawnin'."

The negro was so nervous that his teeth clattered audibly. Hollister made a dismissive gesture and turned back to his dinner, his appetite gone. The butler bowed and scraped his feet, then hustled out of the restaurant, obviously relieved at having performed his distasteful duty. His agitation was no less acute than that which Gil Hollister was now experiencing.

XII

CONSULTING A MEDICAL almanac in his office later that afternoon, Hollister learned that the moon would rise at three minutes after ten o'clock tonight. That would give him time to make his customary early-evening tour of Conestoga's potential trouble-spots and make the five-mile ride up-river to keep his rendezvous with the mayor's wife.

After eating an early supper, the marshal picked up his sacked saddle from his room in the Trail's End Hotel and carried it to a livery stable where he had arranged to rent a close-coupled steeldust gelding for the duration of his stay in town.

Three new Texas outfits had crossed the horizon during this day and the glow of their campfires burned orange holes in the dusk across the Cimarron when Hollister started his cruise of the Stateline deadfalls.

The attitudes of the saloon owners was a doubtful mixture toward their new marshal, Hollister noted. They must have heard of the city council's avowed intention to turn the West Side into a ghost town; their appointed leader, Fritz Utendorffer, had already locked horns with Hollister and was now free on bail pending a jury trial. On the other hand, every saloon owner in town knew of the fair treatment Ike Tezrow had received from Hollister, as a result of last night's trouble in the Jayhawker.

Where did Hollister stand? Was he intending to keep the peace, live and let live—or would he seize every pretext to lock up saloons as he had already locked up Provart's place?

Until they had more to go on, the saloonmen tacity adopted a policy of watchful waiting. Give Hollister enough rope and he'll hang himself, the gossip went along the bars and gaming tables. Or, deal the marshal a few more cards and we'll see how he plays 'em . . .

At eight-thirty the main street resounded to a popping of six-guns and a chorus of rebel yells, as twenty-odd Texas cowhands came pounding into town from their cow camps across the river.

Hollister watched their rowdy arrival with implacable patience, from the gallery of Tommy Rinebeck's Silver Palace Bar, the most centrally located of Stateline's deadfalls.

A good half of the newly-arrived drovers racked their ponies at the Texas Star gambling hall and went inside; others, having favorite spots to get rid of their wages, circulated along the board walks or headed for the fleshpots of Cimarron Street.

Through the indigo twilight Gil Hollister heard a gruff Texas voice inquire,

"What's this about Gil Hollister wearin' the star in this jerkwater burg, Emerson?"

Emerson's reply did not reach Hollister's ears, but a moment later the Texan, a giant of a man wearing a boss-type Stetson and a town coat which identified him as a trail boss rather than an ordinary cowpoke, trailed his spurs over to the Silver Palace and identified Hollister by his law badge.

"Hollister," said the Texan loudly, "I'm Jeff Waugh of the Flyin' W outfit, up from the Panhandle with a jag of longhorns. That was my crew you seen bustin' into town just now."

THE MARSHAL took his cigar from his teeth and nodded gravely.

"I hope they enjoy their stay, Waugh."

The Flyin W boss made a profane comment, adding, "that's up to you, Marshal. I'm short-handed. I don't want to have to bail any of my boys out of your hoosegow in the mornin'."

"And that is up to them, Senor. The rules are simple enough. Keep on the Colorado side of the street. Keep their noses clean. Nobody is going to begrude them some good fun."

Jeff Waugh leaned close enough for Hollister to catch the raw scent of whiskey riding his breath.

"You make a big splash, Hollister, but I'll stand for no monkey business. Yo'll not bust up my crew to put another feather in yore bonnet."

Hollister put his palm against Waugh's chest and shoved the man firmly away from him.

"Don't try to pick a fight with me, Texas man. Go on about your business."

Waugh glowered at the lawman, half inclined to make a brawl of it, and then

turned on his heel and headed toward the batwings. With the saloon's lampshine falling on his craggy features, the Texan growled testily. "You keep out o' my way, marshal, an' we'll keep out o' yourn. No nonsense, savvy, or I'll bust this shanty town wide open."

Having done his crowing, the rooster pushed on into the saloon. The blustering type did not bother Hollister. Waugh had had his say. His pride was satisfied. If Flying W's waddies had ridden into town at a walk, grimly silent, Hollister would have read the storm signals of impending revolt and would have given up his plan to ride out to Overmile's Slash O tonight.

He made the return circuit of the honkies and saloons, keening the town for hints of trouble in the making, and decided Conestoga Crossing had nothing to fear from its visiting Texans between now and midnight.

Passing the Trail's End Hotel, he recognized the second of his erstwhile jailbirds, Sam Brown, hunkered down on the porch steps. The saddle bum lifted a hand to greet Hollister as the marshal passed, causing the lawman to halt.

"Where's your amigo Joe Smith?" he asked, remembering the mysterious warning the other hobo had given him last night.

Sam Brown shruggged. "Hopped a passin' freight this afternoon, marshal. Headin' for Denver. Me, I won't ride the rods through this cow country no more. Them brakemen are plumb pizen. I might not be lucky enough to run acrost another marshal as kind-hearted as you are, Mister Hollister."

Hollister grinned, "I haven't thanked you for swamping out the jail for me. See you around."

"Don't mention it, marshal. I'd swab out the grates of hell for you."

Leaving the bright lights of Saloon Row, Hollister turned in at the Prairie Flower Stable and found the hostler waiting with his rented gelding, geared with the saddle Hollister had brought with him from Wyoming.

"Figger to patrol the town a hossback, marshal?" the stable tender grinned, as Hollister took the reins and stepped into saddle. "I've seen a few marshals come an' go, sir, and I'd say you were safer from a bushwhacker if you stayed afoot."

HOLLISTER made no rejoinder, spurring out of the stable archway and reining down Postoak. He passed the jail and rode as far as Cimarron Street, casually eyeing the shuttered windows of One-Eye Kate Stengel's ramshackle bagnios.

It was dark here on Cimarron Street, as befitted the neighborhood and the habits of its devotees. He reined west, and so passed through the outskirts of Conestoga Crossing until he came to the end of the street.

Off to his left was the dark green line of the Cimarron brakes. He put the gelding into a full gallop when he knew he was out of the town's hearing, picked up the wagon road which skirted the river's north bank, and continued along it, knowing from the Overmile butler's instructions that it would lead him to the Slash O.

This tryst with Aurora Overmile had lain heavy on his thoughts ever since the butler had given him his surreptitious summons at the Sunflower Restaurant at noon. Aurora's note was so worded that he could not disregard it; he believed that the woman's trouble must in some way be linked up with the obscure politics of this cowtown and his part in them.

After three miles the gelding had worked off its steam and had settled down to a ground-covering lope. The prairie was unearthly in its solitude, out here under the stars; the scent of sage and greasewood touched Hollister's nostrils like a balm, gave him a nostalgic urge to be done with his bleak chore and head back to his Rafter H in the Absaroka foothills.

He was better than half way to the Overmile ranch when a shift of wind brought to Hollister's ears the swift beat of hoofs overtaking him from the direction of Conestoga.

Some instinct warned him to gig his steeldust off the road, into the blackness of the dwarf cottonwoods which lined the shale banks of the Cimarron off his left stirrup.

Reining up, he keened the night wind and again picked up the unmistakable

sounds of a rider moving fast up the Conestoga road. The thought occurred to him that someone had seen him riding down Postoak and had, for some reason, decided to follow him.

In view of the fact that he was embarked on a mission of a clandestine nature, keeping a secret tryst with the wife of Conestoga's leading citizen and bank president, Hollister knew the necessity of not being seen here.

The oncoming rider might be one of Overmile's ranch hands returning to the Slash O. It wouldn't be Aurora Overmile, for the butler had said that she and Abbey had ridden out to the ranch early in the day . . .

Suddenly Hollister was aware that the trailing rider had left the road. There was no longer any drumming of hoofs on the night.

"He could have spotted me skylined against the stars," ran the disturbing thought through Hollister's head.

Unease stirred the hackles of the marshal's neck-nape as ten minutes passed without further trace of the unseen rider. He dismounted, holding a hand over the muzzle of his horse, probing the starlighted prairie for movement and seeing none.

Behind him the Cimarron gurgled over its sandy bottom. Frogs trilled their basso profundo melody from the tules. The wind made a stirring in the trees, sifting the downy balls of old cotton through the air like giant snowflakes about him.

Then, from the inky depths of a salt cedar bosque a dozen yards downstream from the spot where he stood beside the gelding, a man's harsh voice lashed the night:

"Head this way, Hollister. I got you covered."

THE VOICE had a familiar ring, charged as it was with threat; and pure reflex brought the marshal's hand away from its hold on the steeldust's throttle to snap a Colt from holster.

Whoever that was in the salt cedars was bluffing; Hollister knew he was invisible against the backdrop of cottonwoods. It was a trick to get him to betray his position here. The trailing rider must have seen him rein off the ranch road and seek the refuge of these trees, but in the uncertain light the rider could not be sure of distance.

The gelding at his back lifted its muzzle and sent a loud whicker through the darkness, catching the other mount's scent on the breeze.

Instantly the blue-orange flash of a gunshot cut from the deep black under the salt cedars, and Hollister's cheek caught the slapping air-whip of a bullet's close passage.

He let go the reins and made a running dive toward the river, landing on all fours. That shot had come from a man bellied to the ground, seeking to skyline him.

The steeldust, spooked by the smell of gunsmoke drifting down wind, started to bolt and stumbled on its trailing reins. That move put the horse out in the open, so the invisible stalker could see the empty saddle.

The night wind died, and in the dead silence that followed Hollister could hear the labored breathing of a man, a rustling of dead leaves as the drygulcher hitched himself along the ground.

Groping for a stick with his free hand, Hollister's fingers closed on a hard gumbo clod. He tossed the clod a dozen feet to his left, heard it strike the cottonwood leaves with a dry rattling thud.

Instantly a second gun-flash broke from the further darkness, well forward of the first. Hollister came to his knees and laid two fast-triggered shots to the right and left of that muzzle flash, and heard the unmistakable sickening *thunk* of lead drilling human flesh.

A human shape came into view against the dull starshine on the sage flats then, a man who was staggering forward at a lurching run, half bent over.

With grim precision Hollister lifted his gun, caught the reeling figure of his would-be ambusher in the sights, and snapped gunhammer.

His third shot lifted the wounded man off his feet and sent him sprawling in a patch of dead white grass. Hollister shifted position, believing he had won this waiting game, but taking no chances of drawing a shot to the position which his own powder flashes had revealed.

Minutes dragged as he heard the fal-

len man's spurred boots drub the hard-packed prairie sod in a dying tattoo. Back beyond the salt cedars a horse broke into the open and galloped back toward Conestoga, following the Slash O road. Its stirrup leathers made flapping sounds to tell Hollister that it carried an empty kack . . .

At length Hollister got to his feet, ejecting fired shells from his .44 and reloading from his belt loops. No further movement came from the sprawled shape out on the sun-seared grama.

He moved to the east so as to approach the fallen target from the rear. Stalking in closer, he stepped on a six-gun lying in the dirt a dozen feet from the body. Then, coming up, he saw that caution was needless. This man was dead, lying on his side with arm outflung, dead grass tangled in his spurs.

Hollister knelt beside the corpse and rolled it over. The head was curtained with blood, making identification impossible. Hollister wiped a match into flame along his pantleg and held the flickering light over the death-contorted face.

His attacker's identity came as a surprise. It was Steamboat Sam Crullers, alias August Provart.

Hollister blew out the match and stood up, looking down at his slain enemy. The pattern behind Provart's trickery was obvious, now. The owner of the Kickapoo Casino had boarded a west-bound train, making certain that Hollister knew he was heading for San Francisco's Barbary Coast. He had done that to put his intended murder victim off guard.

Somewhere up the line—at Fremont Tanks, perhaps—Provart had left the train, hired a livery horse, and had returned to Conestoga to watch Hollister's movements from some secret sentinel post. Seeing the marshal riding out of town, Provart had followed . . .

In the deep east the horizon beyond Conestoga Crossing held a pearly gleam, the pale promise of a full moon due to rise within the half hour. By now Aurora Overmile was probably waiting for him where Pipestone Creek emptied into the river.

The steeldust made no attempt to bolt as Hollister came up to it. In saddle, he put a last glance at the dead man lying in the weeds, and reined west toward the Overmile ranch. The vagrant thought passed through his head that Aurora's note might have been forged by Provart as a means of luring him out of town tonight. But he rejected that possibility. It was hardly likely that a man of Provart's ilk could have solicited the cooporation of Aurora Overmile's personal servant to deliver the message.

No, he must keep this rendezvous at moon-up, if for no other reason than to satisfy his curiosity as to the woman's motive for wanting to meet him in secret.

XIII

THE MOON'S DISC WAS LIFTing above the flat Kansas skyline when Hollister reached the barbed-wire fence which George, the Overmile butler, had identified as the Slash O boundary.

His shoot-out with August Provart had delayed Hollister's passage out from town, but he knew that if Aurora was desperate enough to send a stranger such a personal message, she would wait beyond the appointed hour of their meeting.

As the butler had said, the white-washed buildings and corrals of the mayor's cattle spread loomed in the near distance, built on a horseshoe bend of the Cimarron. A short distance beyond the fence the moon-gilded flats were cut by the meandering dark line of a tributary creek flowing into the river. That would be the Pipestone, at the mouth of which Aurora would be waiting under the cottonwoods.

Reaching Pipestone Creek, Hollister found it dust-dry. He put his gelding down the crumbling claybanks so that his further travel would be out of sight of anyone on the prairie level, and turned south toward the river.

Some instinct for caution prompted him to picket his horse in the first thicket he came to, and continue on down the sandy bottom of the creek on foot.

He had covered a third of the distance to the river when, with a suddenness which caught him wholly by surprise, a rider appeared on the west bank and put his mount down into the creek bed, foreing Hollister to leap out of the way.

A sharp gasp from the rider told the marshal that it was a woman, and as she

whipsawed her reins to keep her buckskin cowpony from shying away from Hollister, his first thought was that this was Aurora Overmile, heading for the creek's mouth to keep her mysterious appointment with him.

Then, as the moonlight struck her face, Hollister saw that it was Abbey, wearing a biscuit-tan Stetson, a blue hickory shirt and a doeskin riding skirt.

Moonlight pouring through a gap in the creek's east bank spotlighted Hollister, brought Abbey swinging out of stirrups, panting heavily as she stared at him through the whirling dust.

"What on earth—are *you* doing here?" her sharp whisper greeted him.

Hollister replied in an equally cautious voice, "I could ask you the same thing, Abbey."

For a moment they were both silent, facing each other at arm's length. For Hollister, this meeting came as an unforeseen and very unwelcome surprise. He could not violate Aurora's confidence by telling her foster daughter the true reason for his presence here.

"I—I frequently take moonlight rides on the ranch, Mr. Hollister," the girl panted stiffly. "I demand to know what you are doing here, five miles from town."

Hollister's predicament put a bright stain on his cheeks. He was groping desperately for a reasonable explanation when Abbey broke the stalemate between them by saying, "You must know Aurora is meeting someone at the river bar. Is that it?"

Where a moment before he had been cudgeling his brains for something to say, Hollister now found himself completely at a loss for words. He could not say "Yes, I'm the man she is meeting." Not until he knew more about the reasons back of Mrs. Overmile's fantastic request for a tryst . . .

"What if your mother *is* meeting a man in the moonlight, Abbey?" he stalled. "She's over twenty-one."

The girl clutched his sleeve, misery in her eyes.

"I—I hardly know why I want to discuss this—with you, Mr. Hollister," she said brokenly. "I hate Aurora as much as I hate my foster father. Does that make me an ungrateful wretch in your estimation?"

Recalling what Jeb Conway had hinted regarding this girl's adoption by the Overmiles, Hollister could only say, "It comes as a surprise, but I don't know the circumstances. Why do you hate Aurora and the Mayor?"

SHE HESITATED a moment, then appeared to push something out of her mind as she came to a decision.

"I can't waste time now," she said frantically. "I've suspected that Aurora met someone secretly out here on the ranch—I've suspected it for months. I—I think she's carrying on a cheap love affair with someone in town, Marshal."

He said puzzledly, "If you hate her, why should you care if she's double-crossing Overmile?"

Abbey removed her hand from his arm. "I—I'm determined to know who Aurora is meeting. Tonight I saw her ride away from the ranch. She seemed—well, nervous. I rode up the river and hid in the trees. Fifteen minutes ago I saw her lover coming up the south bank of the river. He's crossing at the ford now. I want to get there when they meet—"

Now it was Hollister's turn to be astonished. He had supposed that he was going to meet the mayor's wife alone. If she had summoned another man to join this tryst, what was her reason? Was this a man-trap, with Aurora for bait to lure him under the guns of whoever Abbey had seen coming up the Cimarron's opposite side?

"Abbey," the marshal said quickly, "your mother's butler brought me a note at noon today. Aurora wanted me to meet her under the cottonwoods where this creek joins the river. At moonrise. That's why I'm here."

Abbey's jaw dropped. "George delivered you a note from—It's fantastic."

"Come on," Hollister whispered. "Leave your pony here. We'll go on foot. It's just occurred to me, Abbey, that your negro butler run a sandy on me. That note must have been meant for someone else, not me. That's why George grabbed the message back . . . so he could turn it over to the person Aurora actually meant it for."

He helped her tie the horse to a juni-

per snag on the bank and together they headed down the creek, toward the dark cottonwoods which overshadowed the confluence of this dry arroyo with the Cimarron.

"It doesn't make sense," Hollister whispered as they hurried shoulder by shoulder through the shadowy pit of the dry gulch, "but—"

"It does make sense," the girl at his side interrupted. "Old George is a good darky. He's loyal to Dad. He must have disapproved of this secret affair Aurora is carrying on, enough to have betrayed her secret to you—"

They were nearing the cottonwoods now. Slowing to a walk, Abbey following close behind Hollister, the two moved furtively into the deep shade of the cottonwoods arching over the arroyo.

Then they halted stockstill, frozen by what they saw etched against the silvery flashings of the river.

A man and a woman stood in close embrace, down by the water's edge. Two horses waited under the trees.

When they broke apart, both Abbey Overmile and the man at her side recognized the couple. Aurora. And the towering shape of Fritz Utendorffer, king of Conestoga Crossing's underworld, his right arm in a black sling.

Hollister was stunned, knowing so little of the undercurrents of life in the cowtown, but seeing the incongruity of this clandestine embrace between the society queen of Conestoga's upper-crust East Side and Utendorffer, representing all that was evil and predatory in the town's life.

"I can't go on, Fritz," they heard Aurora's voice break on a sob. "Take me away with you, before this thing comes to a head. Sooner or later Claud will know about us . . . and he'd kill me. I know he'd kill me."

HOLLISTER pulled Abbey to a kneeling position in the undergrowth beside him, feeling a hot wash of guilt at this intrusion of Aurora Overmile's privacy, knowing now that her puzzling message had been meant for Utendorffer's eyes, not his. The negro butler had taken destiny in his hands in some misguided hope that notifying Hollister might save his master's wife from a philanderer who threatened Overmile's marriage.

They heard Utendorffer's gutteral Teutonic accents as he held Aurora Overmile in the curve of his good arm, consoling her:

"There, there, my darlink. It iss time for us to go our way, *ja*. . . . This nigger George—should you have trusted him mitt a message for me, *lieber*?"

Aurora's answer did not carry to Hollister and Abbey, crouched in the inner shadows of the creek mouth.

"Der envelop was not sealed. It was a risk."

"It does not matter," Aurora Overmile cried out. "When can we leave? I had to see you. You were in jail when Abbey and I left town this morning. I died a thousand deaths today, wondering if that vile marshal would keep you imprisoned—"

Fritz Utendorffer walked over to his waiting horse and picked up the reins.

"Go back to der town, my luff," he told Aurora Overmile. "Make yourself ready. Leaf de arrangements to me. Der train for Denver will stop in Conestoga tomorrow night at eleffen. Ve vill be aboard it, darlink."

Hollister kept a restraining pressure on Abbey's arm as they watched the Conestoga saloonman mount his dun saddler, bend from saddle to answer his lover's passionate kiss, and then wheel to splash out into the Cimarron's shallows.

Aurora Overmile, sobbing bitterly, mounted her own horse and, spurring it out of the range of Hollister's vision, took the riverbank trail toward the Slash O ranch to westward.

Not until Utendorffer had gained the opposite bank of the Cimarron and was lost to view on his way back to Conestoga did Hollister break the silence that lay between him and Abbey.

"What do you make of it, Abbey?" he asked.

He felt the tremor of the girl's body as he helped her to her feet.

"It is no surprise to know that Aurora has been carrying on an illicite affair," she said heavily. "I have know it for months. A woman cannot keep such a thing out of her eyes. But to think it

was that vile German pig Utendorffer . . ."

Hollister told her than of what he had seen his first morning in Conestoga Crossing: the secret communion of glances which had passed between her foster mother and Utendorffer on the cowtown's main street.

"It is in your power to prevent this—this elopement of Aurora's," Hollister said gently. "Not knowing what lies back of her attachment for Utendorffer, I will not give you any advice on the matter."

THEY started back up the creek bed, Abbey's arm linked through the marshal's. With the nearness of the girl, the ethereal quality of her beauty accentuated by the moonglow, Hollister found himself having to curb the wild hungers that heated his blood, making him want to sweep Abbey Overmile into his arms. He reminded himself that a man who wore a star had no right to romance . . .

"It would seem Aurora is making a bad bargain," he said irrelevantly. "She has wealth, social position . . . everything that goes with being a bank president's wife, a mayor's wife. What can Utendorffer offer her? Wherever he takes her, she will be nothing more than a saloonkeeper's mistress—"

Abbey halted, her eyes round-sprung as she stared up into his face.

"You think Aurora is going beneath her own level, Gil?" she said sharply. "Do you know what Aurora was when Claud Overmile married her in St. Louis? A common trollop, one of Kate Stengel's girls. All her talk of family tradition, Duncan Phyfe furniture . . . lies to gloss over the fact that Claud met her in a brothel . . . a brothel that Claud Overmile owned, that One-Eye Kate managed for him."

Pure shock kept Hollister mute. He sensed that this girl was pouring out her soul to him, that she needed to make a confessional priest of him, and he remained silent, thinking "This is what Jeb Conway was hinting at . . ."

"That is the source of the wealth that made Claud Overmile president of Conestoga's ridiculous little bank," she went on, long-pent-up outrage seething to the surface now. "How did he get to own this cattle ranch? By foreclosing on an honest rancher who borrowed money from Claud Overmile. When did he get the money to stock the Slash O? From his share of One-Eye Kate's houses . . ."

Hollister had his answer to Kate Stengel's cryptic reference to a silent partner behind the traffic of Cimarron Street now. He sensed that One-Eye Kate must have loved Overmile once, and that a jealous bitterness at her lot had caused her to hint at Overmile's secret in her talk with him in the jail office this morning.

"Abbey," Hollister said gently, putting his hands on the girl's shoulders and drawing her to him, "how come a thoroughbred like you got tangled up with the Overmiles?"

She put her smooth cheek against his chest, and he felt the softness of her hair against his jaw.

"I am an Overmile," she said. "I am Claud's n i e c e. My father—Claud's brother—died in a Georgia prison camp in '63, when I was a month old. My mother died to bring me life. It was Claud's money—his dirty, ill-gotten money—that educated me, kept me out of an orphan asylum."

She stepped away from him, heading on up the creek.

"So you see my indebtedness to Claud Overmile, Gil," she said in a steadier voice, and her use of his first name came so naturally that neither of them noticed it. "Perhaps you can see why I have no love for him . . . or for Aurora. It was part of Aurora's sham of respectability that made her claim me as a daughter when we came out to Dodge City, and later to Conestoga Crossing. You see, Claud has to keep up his business contacts with One-Eye Kate, and her business thrives in a trail town."

When they reached her tethered pony, Hollister said gravely, "Kate Stengel has a lot of good in her, I think."

Abbey stood by while he adjusted her saddle girth.

"Compared to Aurora, One-Eye Kate is an angel, Gil," the girl said. "I'm not allowed to visit Kate, of course, but I respect her morals more than I do the woman whom Conestoga accepts as my mother."

Hollister consulted his watch and saw

that it was nearing midnight.

"I'd best get back to town," he said. "You'll spend the night at the ranch?"

"With Aurora? Knowing she'll be awake all night, making her lecherous plans?"

"Women like Aurora seek their own level, Abbey. Why should we work to protect her marriage to your uncle? Let events work themselves out."

ABBEY STEPPED into the stirrups and picked up her reins. The moonlight striking her eyes betrayed the tears silvering her lashes, and Hollister felt a rush of sympathy run through him, a tenderness he had never felt toward any woman in his life.

"Gil," Abbey Overmile said in a husky voice, "I think you are the finest person I have ever met. It makes me realize how shabbily I treated you yesterday. I'm terribly sorry—"

"Thank you for that, Abbey."

She leaned from saddle to touch his cheek.

"Gill," she said earnestly, looking deep into his eyes, "I want to tell you—to beg you—to resign your star and get out of Conestoga while you can. Before something terrible happens to prevent you from returning to Wyoming."

He said humbly, "Does it mean so much to you, Abbey?"

She settled back in saddle, her color deepening.

"Conestoga Crossing isn't worth it, Gil."

Hollister was silent for a long moment. "There is a saying in my business," he said. "Town-tamers die young . . . I've about decided to turn in my star at the end of the week, Abbey, and let Conestoga go to hell in its own way."

"Do it sooner than that. Tomorrow."

She wheeled her horse around, only to rein up when Hollister called after her in a choked voice,

"Abbey! Abbey . . . When I leave . . . I know this sounds presumptuous, coming from an hombre who is practically a total stranger to you But I—"

"Yes, Gil?"

"I'd like to take you back with me when I go."

A smile broke the tear-wet strain of her cheeks as she fiddled with her Stetson lanyard, her every feature going soft.

"If I have offended you, Abbey," he started to say, "I—"

"You could never offend me, Gil Hollister," the girl said in a restrained voice. "Right now I'm so mixed up I—I can't think straight. There will be tomorrow to look forward to, Gil. Perhaps in broad daylight I won't seem so—" She did not finish her thought, but swung her horse abruptly up the steep face of the claybank.

At its rim she twisted in saddle to call back, *"Hasta la vista,* Gil," and then she was gone from his view.

For a lone space of time Gil Hollister stood listening to the receding beat of her pony's hoofs returning to the Slash O, remembering the thrilling touch of her wheat-blonde hair on his throat, his senses lost in the magic of this night as he tried to assess the wild impulses that stormed through his being.

Would he feel this way in broad daylight, as Abbey had been on the verge of asking him? The better part of his mature life had been spent in rubbing the roughness of a frontier world, a life in which sentimentality held no part.

Was he losing his grip on reality, to thus allow a woman he hardly knew suddenly to assume a stature of importance that eclipsed all other things? It was an age-old malady, this restless mystery of life which, being unfathomable, made Hollister suddenly unsure of where he was going. It was all the more disconcerting to him because it was a totally new experience.

Shaking his head to the baffement of it, Hollister started up the creek to get his horse for the return ride to town and the uncertainties of his place behind the star.

XIV

CONESTOGA CROSSING WAS as somnolent as a New England village upon his return. Jeff Waugh and his Flying W drovers had quit bucking the tiger for the night and had returned to their cow camp across the river. A few of the honkies on Stateline had already doused their lamps and locked up for the night.

Because Jeb Conway was out of town and his nerves were too distraught from the day's events to make sleep a possibility, Hollister elected to take over the shift of

his absent assistant.

Before stabling his horse he paid a visit to the Santa Fe depot and from the faded blackboard on its wall learned that the first train in from Fremont Tanks would reach Conestoga at ten-forty the next morning. With luck, old Conway would alight from it and bring with him information which would throw some light on the riddle of Conestoga's destiny.

A telegraph key was clattering inside the station's bay window. Hollister went in, identified himself to the night operator, and was handed a yellow flimsy addressed to him.

As he expected, it was from the chief of police in New Orleans, in reply to the message he had sent out concerning August Provart:

SAM CRULLERS WANTED IN LOUISIANA FOR FIRST DEGREE MURDER BLACKMAIL AND EXTORTION PLEASE HOLD PENDING EXTRADITION FORMALITIES ACKNOWLEDGE

Hollister crumpled the telegram and tossed it into a spitton. He glanced up to see the night telegrapher eyeing him curiously from under the cowling of his green eyeshade.

"Take a message," the marshal said. "Collect. . . . Chief of Police, New Orleans . . . Sam Crullers shot to death this date. Explanatory letter follows. . . . Sign it Gil Hollister, marshal of Conestoga Crossing, Kansas. Or is it Colorado? Damn a town that's cut in two in the middle."

The telegraph operator read back his scribbled notes.

"Sam Crullers?" he echoed. "Stranger in town, maybe?"

Hollister walked out to his waiting horse and called back through the open windows of the telegraph office, "Read all about it in the next week's *Spectator*, my friend. Get that on the wire as soon as possible, will you?"

On his way to the livery stable Hollister reined up at Kelsey's furniture store and undertaking parlors, decided against rousing the coroner at this hour of the night, and rummaged his pockets for a scrap of paper and a stub of pencil.

He scribbled: PICK UP AUGUST PROVART'S REMAINS BESIDE THE SLASH O ROAD 4 MILES WEST OF TOWN AND EARN YOURSELF 50 BUCKS, signed it, and thrust it under Kelsey's door.

The coyotes might beat the coroner to his cold meat, but Hollister saw no reason why Provart, dead or alive, should disturb any man's rest.

After stabling his horse and pegging his saddle, Hollister returned to the Trail's End Hotel with the notion of picking up a supply of cigars to see him through the rest of his night shift.

It was not until he was climbing to the upper floor that he recalled the warning which Joe Smith had whispered to him last night about an ambush trap waiting in Room 7.

At the time, Hollister had given Smith's warning no particular credence. It seemed far-fetched that if an ambush was being planned for the town marshal, that a hobo like Smith should have been let into the secret details.

On the other hand, Smith claimed to have been offered first chance at collecting the bounty on his carcass . . .

"Smith claimed this was the night for it . . ."

REACHING the top of the stairs, Hollister stood peering down the dimly-lighted corridor to the door of his room. The key to that door was in his pocket, on the jail ring. On the other hand, the cheap mortise locks in this hotel could be opened with any bit of wire that was handy.

Light streamed through the keyhole of the first door on Hollister's right hand. A painted sign on the panels read F. J. UTENDORFFER, MANAGER. This hotel belonged to Utendorffer; this suite of rooms on the second story was reserved for his use.

Stepping over to the door, Hollister knelt to peer through the keyhole. His restricted angle of view showed him a bed, its counterpane gleaming whitely in the rays of a gas-mantle lamp. A canvas telescope bag was open on the bed and a stack of men's shirts and socks was piled beside it.

Someone was moving around inside this room. Utendorffer had had plenty of time to get back from his rendezvous with

Aurora Overmile. The German was planning to leave town forever on tomorrow night's Denver train. That would account for this packing of baggage . . .

Stealthily, Hollister tried the knob. The door was bolted on the inside.

Loosening his Colt .44 in holster, Hollister came to his feet and rapped his knuckles on the door.

The sound of movement inside Utendorffer's room broke off. Hollister thought he could hear a man's muffled breathing on the other side of the panels. Then Utendorffer's thick voice came gutterally: "Who iss?"

Mimicking the Dixie drawl of the negro night clerk, Gil Hollister said, "Mistuh Utendo'ffh, suh, I hab a message—"

After a moment's silence, Hollister heard the bolt withdrawn and the door opened slightly. Instantly the marshal threw his weight against it, driving the door against the big German's injured arm in its sling.

A bellow of pain came from Fritz Utendorffer as he staggered back. When he recovered his balance he found himself looking into the black bore of Hollister's six-shooter.

The lawman's brittle gaze swept around the lavishly appointed hotel room. Dresser drawers were open and in disarray. In addition to the bag on the bed, a camel-back trunk half filled with personal belongings was open in the middle of the room.

"Fixing to go somewhere, Fritz?"

UTENDORFFER'S porcine eyes blazed their hatred between greasy hammocks of flesh. The saloon boss of Conestoga Crossing was in his shirt sleeves, his coat hanging from a bedpost, and the big rubber stock of a six-gun protruded from a holster slung low and thonged down on his right hip. To draw it the German would have to reach across with his uninjured left hand.

"You're free on bail, Fritz," Hollister went on conversationally. "That means you take no trips for thirty days."

Utendorffer was panting asthmatically, fear kindling in his shoebutton eyes. The man was trapped and showed it.

"Py Gott, marshal, dere iss nozzings in my court order to keep me from making der short business trip to Abilene, no? As long as I am back in Conestoga for der trial."

Hollister shrugged, easing his gunhammer down with his thumb.

"Besides," Utendorffer went on in a wheedling voice, "you t'ink I vould leaf dis town undt all my holdings here? Dis hotel iss mine. So iss der Index Saloon. So iss—"

Hollister waved Utendorffer into silence.

"Fritz, I don't give a damn if you're here when Judge McArdle calls your case. I probably won't be here myself, a month from now. In fact I know it won't. I'll be back on my spread in Wyoming by then."

Utendorffer's brows arched, betraying his surprise. Then a wicked intelligence was born in the German's squinting eyes.

"So vat are ve augering aboudt, friend Hollister? It iss very late. It iss past your bedtime, *nien?* Vould you care for a nightcap now dot you are off duty, *ja?*"

Hollister shook his head.

"You and Aurora are leaving town tomorrow," he dropped his bombshell on the dumfounded saloonman. "Suppose you step down the hall to my room and talk that over, eh?"

Utendorffer was frozen in his tracks. When he finally rallied out of it he blustered apoplectically, "Dot *verdammt* butler of der Mayor's—dere iss no odder vay you could haff know about us—"

Holister stepped to the door and opened it wide. His gunhammer made its premonitory click as he gestured Utendorffer to follow him.

"Come on. We'll make *habla* in my room, not yours."

Fritz Utendorffer stumbled forward through the door, turning toward Hollister's room. The marshal reached out to snatch the German's six-gun out of leather, tossing it onto the bed before closing the door behind them.

"Go ahead," Hollister whispered, thrusting his six-gun muzzle against Utendorffer's spine. "Room Seven."

If a murder trap was waiting in Hollister's hotel room, Utendorffer gave no indication of it. He halted in front of room 7 and made no comment as Hollister inserted a key into the lock and twisted it.

Shoving the door open to let the wall sconce lamp in the corridor throw its

murky illumination into Room Seven, Hollister whispered with his lips close to Utendorffer's ear, "Step inside, Fritz. You first."

For the first time, Fritz Utendorffer seemed to snap himself out of the trance which had seized him at Hollister's mention of the plans he and Aurora Overmile had made at their moonlit tryst five miles up the river tonight.

The color drained from Utendorffer's doughy cheeks as he reared back, recoiling from the threshold despite the pressure of Hollister's gun muzzle reaming his back.

"No—no!" choked out the German. "No, Hollister—"

Keeping well back from the door, the marshal whispered savagely, "Why not, Fritz? Is somebody waiting to shoot down the man who steps into Room Seven? Is that it?"

Hollister saw Utendorffer's veins bulge on his neck, saw the cold perspiration break from the pores on his forehead. The German was staring into the emptiness of Room Seven as if it were a den of rattlesnakes.

Then an anguished cry wrenched from the man: "It iss Fritz Utendorffer! Don't shoot—don't shoot—"

STEPPING behind the saloonman, Hollister planted the sole of his right boot against Utendorffer's hip and gave the pudgy German a shove which sent him staggering into Room Seven to fall headlong.

Turning, Hollister raked his gun across the glass chimney of the hallway lamp, plunging this section of the hotel into darkness. Timed with the cascading glass, Hollister stepped quickly through the doorway of his room and stepped to one side, putting his shoulder blades against the wall.

Moonlight pouring through the two windows of the room picked out the spectral shapes of the chiffonier, the brass bedstead, Hollister's warbag hanging from a wall peg in an opposite corner.

The moonlight spilled a silver rectangle on the threadbare carpet where Utendorffer lay blubbering, half fainting from the pain of having dropped on his bullet-shattered elbow.

A blur of movement beyond the bed caught Hollister's eye as he crouched waiting, out of the moonlight. The curtains which screened off a triangular-shaped wardrobe closet diagonally across the room billowed out and a man's shape moved indistinctly across the faded pattern of the wallpaper.

Hollister lifted his gun and tripped hammer, driving a slug toward the hidden assassin. He heard the bullet strike home, and the room resounded to the high-pitched wail of a man mortally hit.

Joe Smith's warning had been anything but whiskey talk. Friends of this saloon boss who lay groveling on the floor had plotted to murder him tonight when he came in off duty, and there would have been no clues to point to his killer.

As that thught ran through his head, Gil Hollister saw that man who had hidden himself in Room Seven take a lurching step forward which carried him into the bar of soft moonshine pouring through the nearest window.

A silhouetted six-gun was in the man's hand; as Hollister raised his gun for a second shot if necessary, he saw the weapon drop to the floor and held his fire, waiting for his target to drop.

Falling, the would-be bushwhacker clutched an out-blowing window curtain to break his drop.

Stepping away from the wall, Hollister was passing Fritz Utendorffer's sprawled shape on the floor when he saw the wounded man across the room pull his way to his feet with the aid of the window curtain and, summoning his dying strength, launch himself at the open window.

Hollister yelled as he bolted across the room, too late to snatch the interloper's disappearing legs. Reaching the window he leaned out in time to hear the grisly crash of Utendorffer's hired killer landing on the hard ground fifteen feet below.

Incredibly, the man had survived that fall: Hollister could hear him groaning down there, cursing pitifully.

Holstering his gun, Hollister reached for the coil of rope provided for use as a fire escape in case of emergency. He snapped at the German still lying prone in front of the hall door, "Stay hitched, Utendorffer!"

Lashing the rope to a bedpost, Hollister tossed the coils out the window, straddled

the sill and made his hand-over-hand descent to the ground, his boots clattering against the hotel's weatherbeaten clapboards.

THE INJURED GUNMAN lay in the black shadow of a hotel wing. Kneeling beside him, Hollister scratched a match into flame. He found himself staring into the twisted, stubble-rimed face of Sam Brown, the wood-cutting prisoner he had released from jail along with Joe Smith.

Blood was guttering from a bullet hole in the hobo's belly. One leg was twisted at an angle under him, broken by his fall.

"Marshal," panted the dying tramp,, "I reckon . . . I had this . . . comin' to me. No hard . . . feelin's . . ."

Hollister glanced up at the window overhead, glad he had taken the precaution of disarming Utendorffer. He put a hand on Brown's shoulder and said gently, "Who paid you to set this trap for me, feller?"

Brown's sand was running out fast and his voice came in a series of retching gasps almost unintelligible.

"Feller . . . with a big diamond . . . in his front tooth. Paid me . . . five hundred . . ."

After a paroxysm of coughing, the saddle tramp went on, "Joe Smith . . . got the same offer . . . marshal. Only he . . . knew a friend . . . when he saw one . . ."

"The hombre who paid you was Gus Provart," Hollister said. "I killed him tonight, Brown."

"*Bueno.* That's . . . that's—"

The hobo slumped and was gone. This man would bring Coroner Kelsey another fifty dollars for burial in a pine box in Conestoga's boot hill. His headboard would carry the fictitious name he had used in signing the jail register.

"Yes," Hollister whispered. "Joe Smith was my friend. He knew if he turned down Provart's offer to bushwhack me, some other buscadero would snap up the chance . . ."

Hollister stood up, gripped the dangling rope and scaled it to crawl back into his room. Utendorffer had vanished. The lights still burned in the German's room when Hollister got there. Utendorffer had not even tarried to pick up his revolver.

A fast beat of horse's hoofs leaving the hitch rack out front wafted up the stairwell from the lobby and Hollister thought, "Utendorffer is probably lighting a shuck while he can."

Downstairs, the agitated negro clerk confirmed that hunch. Fritz Utendorffer had fled downstairs and out of the lobby, hatless and coatless, "as ifn de debbil was aftuh him, suh."

Hollister briefly considered starting a hunt for the man, and then, aware of how much he needed sleep and rest, decided against it. To the big-eyed clerk he said drily, "I doubt if you'll ever see your boss again, son. The devil *is* after him."

XV

A SOUND OF KNOCKING AT HIS door roused Gil Hollister from the bed where he had flung himself, fully clothed, after returning to Room 7 and barricading the door. Outside his window the day was dark enough to be mistaken for waning moonlight, but his watch told Hollister that it was five minutes of eleven.

"It's Colonel Conway, marshal!" old Jeb's voice sounded above the whine of a sharp wind through loose shingles of the hotel roof. "Just got off the rattler from Fremont Tanks."

Hollister swung his legs off the bed and walked over to the window, shutting it against the high wind blowing off the Colorado plains, freighted with dust that was already a thick film over everything in the room. Judging from the dust clouds racking up to the northwest, Conestoga would be in for a sand storm of possibly cyclonic proportions before the day ended.

He removed the chair from under the doorknob and let his night marshal in. Under one arm Conway carried a cylindrical roll of heavy paper, which he unrolled to reveal as a blueprint of Fremont Tanks townsite, covered with Jeb's arthritic notations.

"We're in for a hell of a dust storm," Conway muttered, shaking gritty powder off his faded army tunic. "She's blowin' the lid off o' Nebrasky an' dumpin' it into Kansas."

Hollister said with drowsy sourness, "I'm not interested in the state of the weather. What did you find out?" He went over to the marble-topped washstand and

emptied a pitcher of tepid water into a chipped china bowl, into which he immersed his head to clear it. The water was instantly brown with dust.

"Well, boss," Conway said importantly, seating himself on the bed and spreading out the town map, "it seems that there has been considerable movement in real estate over to the Tanks the past eighteen-twenty months. Seems like a total of sixty-odd parcels o' ground have changed hands."

Hollister toweled himself dry and turned to scan the old codger across the room.

"Well—who's back of all this rush to buy up county seat property, Colonel?" He had to talk loud above the whining wind.

The oldster shrugged, a crestfallen look touching him.

"That's the rub, boss. It's an outfit callin' itself the Arroyo County Land Development Company. That don't tell us a hell of a lot, does it?"

Hollister walked over to sit down beside Conway. Picking up the map and spreading it across his lap, he saw that the major portion of the townsite's lots were marked with an X.

"That X indicates property purchased fer cash by this Arroyo County Land Development Company, boss," Conway said. "The recorder said an hombre from Denver name of John C. Lamont did the actual buyin', sort of workin' on the sly. One day he come in with a bale of deeds big enough to choke a brimmer bull, plunked it down on the recorder's desk and sez, 'Enter these transfers, please. I been savin' 'em so as to keep the market from jumpin' sky-high.'"

Hollister studied Conway's notations on the plat with a keenly analytical eye. The Arroyo County Land Development Company, through its agent, had apparently concentrated on buying up land bordering the Santa Fe right-of-way, to a depth of six blocks on either side.

Only the property already occupied by saloons, stagecoach stations, the courthouse plaza, and other permanent features of Fremont Tanks were registered to individual owners.

"This Lamont jasper got most of his town lots for ten bucks up to fifty," Conway went on. "He sewed up around a thousand acres of outlyin' sagebrush for a dollar an acre—about all it's worth."

Hollister got to his feet and slapped the old man on the back.

"You did a good job, Colonel. Take the rest of the week off and go on a toot. You earned it."

Conway scratched his ear.

"What good's this information goin' to do you, boss?"

Hollister shrugged. "You found out that a land boom has been going on, twenty miles up the railroad from Conestoga," he said. "A land boom that was kept a pretty strict secret. Why should anyone want to tie up ground at Fremont Tanks?"

Conway looked blank. "Beats the hell out o' me, boss, No self-respectin' gopher would pick on that tank stop to dig a hole."

HOLLISTER GRINNED. "If Conestoga Crossing should suddenly fold up, there would be quite a boom at the Tanks, Colonel. Shipping yards to build—on ground owned by this Arroyo County Land Development Company. Saloons, gambling houses. I imagine One-Eye Kate would want a solid block of building sites, alone."

Old Conway continued to look more puzzled by the minute.

"Who says Conestoga is goin' to dry up and move west to Fremont Tanks?" the night marshal demanded. "I don't savvy this lay-out, Gil."

Hollister put on his Stetson and beckoned for Conway to follow him.

"We'll savvy a lot more," he told the old man, "when we find out from the state capital who is on the board of directors of this Land Development concern. Whoever it is, I reckon, has a pretty good idea that Conestoga Crossing won't be handling what's left of the Chisholm Trail cattle business for very long."

Going down the lobby steps, Hollister and Conway were met by George, the wooly-headed negro butler from the mayor's residence. His clothing was veneered with wind-driven dust.

Hollister said to Conway, "Go down to the dining room and order a couple of breakfasts, Jeb. I'll be with you directly."

When Conway had peglegged his way downstairs, Hollister laid a friendly hand

on the negro butler's shoulder.

"I showed up at your mistress' hideout on Pipestone Creek last night, George. If you're worrying about whether you did right, I want you to know that I feel you did."

Tears glittered on the yellowed whites of the ex-slave's eyeballs. His voice was barely addible above the wind outside:

"Mistuh Mahshall, suh, I don't wot I done becuz I—I didn' want de Mayuh to hab a busted heart. Ah figgered mebbe you could bring Missus Aurorah to her senses, Mistuh Hollistuh, suh."

The lawman said gently, "You can't save an apple when it's rotten at the core, George. If I were you I wouldn't tell the Mayor anything about this business. He might not understand."

George dabbed at his ebony cheeks with a bandanna. Then he said hoarsely, "Mistuh Hollistuh, suh, Miss Abbey done sent me ovah dis mawin'. She jes' got in f'om de ranch, suh."

Hollister said sharply, "Was Mrs. Overmile with her?"

The negro shook his head. "No suh. Miss Abbey done brang a lettuh back f'om de ranch, f'om my lady. She think you orter come ober to de house an' . . . talk. Dat's all George know."

Hollister's thoughts were far away. Aurora was afraid to come back to town, he mused inwardly. Or maybe Utendorffer rode directly to Slash O last night . . .

"Tell Miss Abbey," he said to the negro, "that I will see her directly. And thanks, George. You're a good man."

The butler knuckled his forehead and shuffled down the stairs ahead of Hollister. Joining Conway in the Trail's End dining room, the marshal settled himself to devouring a stack of buckwheats with keen relish.

WHEN THEIR BREAKFAST was over, Hollister handed the oldster one of his cigars. As they lighted up, the marshal asked softly, "Jeb, how did you know Abbey Overmile wasn't Aurora's daughter? It's a secret the rest of this town doesn't know."

Conway was silent for a moment, his withered cheeks working as he got his cheroot drawing.

"I knew Abbey's real Daddy," he said

Voodoo!

Strange new adventures in the teeming land of tomtom terror and savage intrigue await you in every exciting issue of JUNGLE STORIES. Your spine will tingle as you read these stirring tales of fast action set amid the brooding kraals and danger-ridden brush of darkest Africa! You will meet Ki-Gor, great White Lord of the Jungle, and his lovely blonde mate, Helene — and share with them the dangers and thrills of stalking beasts of prey, of conquering the weird powers of unearthly witch doctors, of living wildly in this strange and primitive veldt!

On Sale at
Your Newsstand

JUNGLE STORIES

finally. "He was the infantry sargint I fit under in the War. After I lost my leg I heard that Sargint Overmile died in a Johnny Reb prison camp somewhere down in Georgia. Last thing we ever talked about was his baby girl, name of Abbey."

Hollister shoved back his chair and got to his feet.

"Conway," he said, "can you keep a secret?"

The old soldier grinned and winked. "I kept Abbey's, didn't I? She never even knew I was her Daddy's friend."

The wind slapped them with stinging violence as they left the hotel and headed down the street, bracing themselves against the storm's thrust at their backs. Hollister cupped hand over his mouth and said to the hobbling veteran, "Colonel, I aim to marry Abbey and take her back to Wyoming—if she'll have a beat-up old hoss like me."

Conway halted stockstill, grabbing a hitch bar for support against the gale that howled down the canyon of false fronts. Emotion shone in his rheumy orbs as he stared up at the lawman.

"God bless ye for confidin' in me, son. Abbey's fine as they come." His grin faded as he reached up to tap the silver star on Hollister's vest. "Gil, I'm old enough to be yore pappy, so give heed to what I'm goin' to say. If you want Abbey, git rid o' that damn' badge quick as ever you kin. You've already outlived the time they allot to a marshal in Conestoga."

Hollister's answer came as a profound shock to old Conway.

"This is my last day behind the star, Jeb. Now you hustle along and get started on that spree I promised you."

Conway's eves were suspiciously wet as he watched Gil Hollister fade beyond the dust clouds which obscured the nooning sun. Then the old man turned to the shelter of the nearest saloon.

Entering the Sante Fe depot, Hollister scribbled a brief message addressed to the State Land Office in Denver:

REQUEST INFORMATION REGARDING STOCKHOLDERS AND OFFICERS OF ARROYO COUNTY LAND DEVELOPMENT COMPANY OPERATING AT FREMONT TANKS. PROMPT REPLY URGENTLY SOLICITED.

Handing the paper to the telegrapher on duty, Hollister asked, "How soon will the wire be clear to get this on the way? I'd like priority over routine messages if possible.

The brasspounder turned to his instruments.

"It's a slack time of day," he said. "Unless this duster blows down the wire, this will be in Denver in twenty minutes."

Hollister glanced at his watch. It was almost twelve.

"Have a boy deliver the answer to the Trail's End Hotel desk as soon as you get an answer, will you?" he asked, dropping a gold coin on the telegrapher's table.

From the Santa Fe Depot Hollister bucked the windstorm up Stateline, turning east into the shelter of the alley flanking the Stockman's Bank. Passing the window of Claud Overmile's private office he saw the mayor busy at his desk, and thus knew the coast was clear for a call at Abbey's home.

HOLLISTER was walking through the wrought iron gate fronting the banker's ornate gingerbreaded home when, through the mealy dust, he caught sight of Abbey waiting in the porch swing. She still wore her riding garb of the night before. The ravages of a sleepless night and a hard trip back to town in the teeth of the mounting storm showed on the girl's dust-grimed face as she ran down the steps to meet him.

"Gil, thanks for coming," she said breathlessly. "I had to tell you—Aurora and that Utendorffer pig—have already—"

The marshal took the girl's hands in his as she broke off, suddenly choked up with emotion.

"Tell me about it, Abbey."

After a moment the girl got herself under control. They moved to the shelter of the Overmile porch to get in out of the driving wind, which had reduced visibility to less than a hundred yards here in Conestoga. When she resumed speaking it was in a voice completely devoid of feeling.

"Well, Aurora threw a tantrum when I rode in last night. She accused me of spying on her. I let her rave. I went to my room and locked the door. I couldn't sleep."

Hollister waited for her to go on.

"Sometime before daylight—it must have been three or four o'clock—I heard a rider come in from the Conestoga road," Abbey said. "It was Fritz Utendorffer. They talked, he and Aurora I mean, for quite a while, out by the gate."

The girl reached in a pocket of her leather riding skirt and drew out a sealed envelope.

"Aurora came to my door just at dawn," Abbey said. "She handed me this. 'Fritz and I are going away,' she said. 'Take this to Claud. By the time he reads it we will be too far away for him to ever find us, Abbey.' And pretty soon the two of them rode away. I think they were headed for Fremont Tanks. A through train to the west coast goes through there about nine o'clock. They would have had plenty of time to catch it."

When Abbey had finished her narrative, Hollister took the envelope from the girl's hand. Aurora Overmile had written across it, *For Claud Overmile — Personal.*

Hollister tongued his cheek thoughtfully, tapping the letter on his thumbnail.

"Obviously, I haven't delivered it to Claud yet," Abbey said. "I wanted to—talk to you first. He must have known when Aurora didn't get back to town last night that something unusual was up. Aurora detested the ranch. She never spent a night there . . . except when she met Utendorffer."

Hollister pulled in a deep breath, and during the space of time he held it in his lungs he came to a decision.

"Abbey, I'm turning in my badge today. I've dug up information which leads me to believe that Conestoga Crossing can do without my services. I think you know why. I don't cotton to pulling chestnuts out of the fire for people who pretend to want to reform a town so they can destroy it for their own profit."

A glad light transformed Abbey Overmile's face. Before she could speak, Hollister said gravely, "Abbey, have you ever heard of the Apache County Land Development Company—I mean, through your work at the bank?"

She shook her head. "No-o, I haven't."

"Does the name John C. Lamont mean anything to you?"

"No. No, it doesn't."

Illustrated Comic Booklets

Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4½x2¾. We will send 25 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of $1.00 or 75 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of $2.00. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C. O. D. Send Cash or Money-order.

REPSAC SALES CO.

1 Orchard St. Dept. F-73 New York 2, N. Y.

BOOKLETS

The kind grown ups like. Each one of these booklets is POCKET SIZE, also contains 8 ILLUSTRATIONS, and is full of fun and entertainment. 12 of these joke booklets. ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid upon receipt of $1.00 or 24 BOOKLETS ALL DIFFERENT shipped prepaid for $2 cash or money order. No orders sent C. O. D. Print name and address and mail to:

TREASURE NOVELTY CO., Dept. 72-F

2 Allen Street, New York 2, N. Y.

SADDLE RINGS

Realistic reproductions of championship rodeo saddles! Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver. Massive! Impressive! Styles for both men and women. Also children.

SEND NO MONEY! Just clip ad and mail with name, address, ring size. Pay postman only $2.98 plus postage. Send cash, and we mail postpaid. Wear 5 days. If not delighted, return for refund.

ARIZONA INDUSTRIES, Dept. 205A, Scottsdale, Ariz.

BELIEVE IN LUCK?-$

Carry a pair of GENUINE BRAHMA RED LIVE HIGHLY MAGNETIC LODESTONES! Legend reputes, Occult Oriental ancients superstitiously carried two Live Lodestones as MOST POWERFUL MAGNETIC "LUCKY" CHARMS, one to "attract" Good Luck in Money, Games, Love, Business, Work, etc., the other to "prevent" Bad Luck, Losses, Evil, Trouble, Harm, etc. Believe in Luck? Carry a Pair of these curious Genuine Brahma Red Live Lodestones! We make no supernatural claims. $1.97 Postpaid for the two, with all information. 28c extra if C.O.D. Send $1.97 and save 28c. Satisfaction GUARANTEED or Money Returned. Order yours NOW!

ASTROL CO., Dept. 18579, Main P. O.
Box 14-A, BROOKLYN, N. Y.

NOTICE! Beware of Imitations! We absolutely GUARANTEE these Genuine Brahma Lodestones are ALIVE! We believe they are just what you want, the REAL THING—POWERFUL DRAWING, Extra Highly Magnetic! Fully Guaranteed! Copyright'37-A. Co.

SPEEDY STITCHER

Sews Lock-Stitch Like a Machine

Save time and money in repairing shoes, boots, leather jackets, gloves, auto tops, saddles and many other things. Speedily sews grain bags, burlap, canvas, leather and heavy textiles and wire cuts on livestock. Ready to use the minute you need it. Comes with reel of waxed thread and 3 needles in different sizes. Spare needles are carried in handle. Get this handy tool now so that you'll have it when you need it, at home, on hunting, fishing or camping trips. Priceless when you need it, but costs only $1.50 postpaid if you send cash, check or money order. C.O.D. $1.50 plus fee and postage.

ONLY $1.50 POSTPAID

SPORTSMEN'S POST

Dept. FP
386 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N. Y.

HOLLISTER stared down at Aurora Overmile's letter, knowing the tragedy its contents would bring to Conestoga's leading citizen, knowning that Claud Overmile's own avarice had brought this retribution home to roost.

"Abbey, I'm going to call the city council together to make my resignation," he said. "With your permission, I will deliver this letter of Aurora's to the Mayor when I see fit."

"Of course," Abbey said. "However you want it, Gil."

Their visit had run its course; the next few hours would be busy ones for Hollister, perhaps the most important hours of his crowded life up to now. But there was something he had to say to this girl first, some instinctive tocsin ringing in the recesses of his mind warning him that this day's impending events might forever deprive him of this opportunity to speak.

"Abbey . . . in my clumsy fashion I told you I loved you, last night. Broad daylight hasn't changed that notion. If I had known you a dozen years I could not love you more than I do now."

Her face was turned up to him, the invitation in her parted, tremulous lips plain for him to read. He found himself reaching for her, pulling her soft yielding body hard against his. Her arms crept up his back, pulling his head against her lips as they met his kiss with a passionate intensity no less ardent than his own.

The swell of her firm young breasts against him put a solid beat to his blood, the sweetness of her mouth was like a drug, making his senses swim. When finally he released her, she stepped back, her face heated and exultant, her eyes filled with a love for him he knew would never die.

"Where you go, there go I," she whispered. And then, not wanting to break the spell that bound them, she turned and ran up the steps to vanish into the house where she had known nought but unhappiness as a member of its hypocritical circle.

Hollister turned, shoving Aurora Overmile's letter into his levis pocket. His senses were still aflame when he reached Stateline Street and saw Lige McPheeters standing at the door of his freight warehouse, braced against the windy blasts.

Approaching the man who held the office of town treasurer, Hollister said bluntly in answer to the councilman's hand-wave, "Mr. McPheeters, I want to see the members of the town council in private session as soon as it can be arranged. I'm resigning my office, but before I do I have an announcement to make which will mean the life or death of Conestoga Crossing."

McPheeters' jaw sagged open. Finally he recovered himself enough to say, "I guess I can arrange it, marshal. We usually hold our meetings in the back room of Johansen's Barber Shop."

Hollister's eyes glinted with sadonic humor.

"Isn't that on the East Side?"

McPheeters reddened. "Johanson was our mayor before the balance of power came to the East Side. He doesn't charge us any rent for the use of his premises or his safe. It's about all we have in the way of a city hall."

Hollister shouted above the wind, "How will three o'clock be? With this storm on, business will be slack for everyone concerned."

McPheeters nodded. "Okay. I hope we can persuade you to change your mind about leaving, Mr. Hollister. You've made a fine start at taming this town. We need you. If it's a matter of more salary—"

The freighter's voice trailed off as he saw Hollister angling across Stateline Street, streamers of dust lifting from his boots.

Judging from the ominous sky, behind whose dust pall the sun glowed like a tarnished copper rivet, Hollister surmised that this storm had yet to reach its peak and that it might even cause damage to buildings and trees if it increased in velocity. In view of what he had in store for the town council at three o'clock, a stormy day seemed somehow fitting, grimly prophetic.

A signboard tore loose from a dance hall front and Hollister narrowly escaped being brained by it. Tumbleweeds bounded past him as he turned down Postoak toward the jail, weeds that raced through the gray gloom like animals fleeing a prairie fire. Flying shingles and tatters of

scrap paper filled the air like birds.

In the shelter of the jailhouse office, Hollister killed an hour composing a report on August Provart's death for the New Orleans police. On his way to the coroner's to get a copy of the gambler's death certificate to enclose in his report, Hollister dropped into the Trail's End hotel lobby and was surprised to find the answer to his Denver telegram waiting in his letterbox.

He retired to an empty corner of the lobby, avoiding the loafers congregated here to escape the windstorm's fury, and his hands had a tremor as he tore open the envelope, knowing the high drama this moment held.

This message would name the man or men who wanted Conestoga Crossing wiped off the map so as to pave the way for a real-estate boom in Fremont Tanks. It would shed light on the mystery of why the town council had brought Hollister out of his Wyoming retirement to be the instrument of Conestoga's decease.

The telegram told him what he already knew, giving him the proof he had lacked to back his hunches. The State Land Office report was damning, irrevocable:

ALL STOCK IN APACHE COUNTY LAND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION VESTED IN NAME OF CLAUD OVERMILE ADDRESS CONESTOGA CROSSING KANSAS.

XVI

THE FRAME SHACK HOUSING Johansen's Barber Shop was wedged between the Jayhawker Saloon, on the corner of Postoak, and the Ace of Hearts Dance Hall. But despite its sheltered position, the room back of the barber shop which Conestoga Crossing used as a meeting place for the town council shook and creaked to the endless pressure of the sixty-mile gale which raged in off the Colorado prairie.

A green-shaded oil lamp shed its fitful light over the tense, waiting faces of the townsmen gathered here at Gil Hollister's request, men who knew that Hollister had been their last resort and with his departure, the marshal's office would be difficult to fill.

LAW...
STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. More Ability: More Prestige: More Money We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW.
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 2481-L, Chicago 5, Ill.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?
Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.
In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
FREE BOOK
THE NEWELL COMPANY
293 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

DICE-CARDS
Perfect Dice, Magic Dice, Magic Cards—READ THE BACKS—Inks, Daubs, Poker Chips, Gaming Layouts, Dice Boxes, Counter Games, Punch-boards, Articles never before heard of. Send for famous 72 page fully illustrated BLUE BOOK CATALOGUE today while supply lasts! Enclose 10c coin to help pay cost of shipping and handling.
K. C. CARD CO., 815 S. Wabash Avenue, Chicago 5, Ill.

12½ MILE RANGE
LONG VIEW BINOCULARS
Guaranteed perfect precision ground lenses. Triple power 12½ mile range. Sturdy construction. Focus is adjustable to your own eye-strength. 38-Millimeter objective. INTRODUCTORY OFFER ONLY $3.98. (Sold for much higher.) 10 day money-back guarantee. SEND CHECK or MONEY ORDER FOR $3.98 and we prepay postage. Or sent C. O. D. and you pay postage charges..... $3.98
DOMAR SALES CO.
480 LEXINGTON AVE., DEPT. B-516, NEW YORK, N. Y.

FEAR NO ONE!
Master American Combat
JUDO
Master combat judo and you won't be afraid of anyone. You'll stand up to the toughest bully and give more than you take. Bernard J. Cosneck, author of "American Combat Judo," was twice Big-Ten wrestling champion, and has devoted many years developing personal fighting methods. In supervising the training of U. S. Coast Guardsmen, he improved Japanese Ju-jitsu and perfected new fighting methods for the armed services. This 128 page book is chock-full of the most effective defensive and offensive fighting methods, containing 188 photographs illustrating Ju-jitsu, foot fighting, police tactics and commando fighting. If it's worth $1.00 to you to have the edge on the other guy, send for "American Combat Judo" now. It will be mailed postpaid for only $1.00 in cash, stamps, money-order or check.
SPORTSMEN'S POST, Dept. FMS
366 Madison Avenue New York 17, N. Y.

Claud Overmile paced the floor like a penned animal, his silvery hair dull with the storm's ingrained dirt, the clamp of his jaw and the curbed suspense glinting in his eyes testifying to the strain the mayor was under.

"Why in hell don't he show up?" Lige McPheeters demanded testily, snapping open the hunting case of his turnip watch. "Three-fifteen and he ain't here yet."

Dorr Pettigrew, secretary of the council, shifted his shoulders under the coat which bore the fire chief's badge pinned conspicuously to its fleece collar and said, "Who does he think he is, having us at his beck and call? If he isn't here in five minutes I'm going back to my store."

Sol Saperstein of the Bella Union Hotel said wryly above the banshee wail of the storm ripping at the shingles overhead, "You'll wait, my friend. We've got to do some tall talking if we expect to keep a man of Hollister's caliber working for us . . ."

The door from the barber shop opened at that moment to reveal the tall, dominating shape of Gil Hollister. With him was One-Eye Kate Stengel, mistress of the town's red-light district.

"What is this, marshal?" bellowed Lige McPheeters, eyeing the scarlet-gowned courtesan with all the outraged dignity that went with a man who occupied the head deacon's post of the Conestoga Crossing Methodist Church. "I understood this was to be a town council meeting. If so, this woman is trespassing—"

Hollister's metallic eyes glinted with an angry light.

"Get up and give this lady your chair, McPheeters. Madam Stengel has as much at stake in this town as you do."

White faced, the wagon freighter got to his feet and stepped back as Hollister led One-Eye Kate around the table which occupied the center of the room and gallantly held the chair while she seated herself.

Favoring Hollister with a gracious smile, Kate Stengel surveyed the men circling the table with a humorous twinkle behind her monocle.

Claud Overmile stepped to the table and planted his big hands on its edge, staring across the glare of the oil lamp at Gil Hollister.

"I understand you called this session to tender your resignation as town marshal, Hollister!" snapped the mayor. "I want to remind you that you have a contract, under the terms of which you do not draw a penny of salary until—"

Hollister reached up to jerk the ball-pointed star off his vest and flip it to the table in front of the banker.

"To hell with your salary and your contract, Overmile!" Hollister thundered. "I will do what talking there is to be done. The reason I am resigning is because I was brought here under false pretenses."

"False pre—" Sol Saperstein started to protest, and then sputtered off into silence.

FROM under his arm Hollister took a rolled blueprint which he now placed on the table in full view of all.

"I will make this brief," the man from Wyoming said. "Gentlemen, most of you in this room believe I came here to do an honest job of restoring law and order to your town. The fact of the matter is, my job was really to get this community boycotted by the Chisholm Trail cattle drovers who support it."

Hollister waited a minute to let his accusation sink in. He saw that Claud Overmile was staring at the plat of Fremont Tanks with the fixed intensity of a drugged man.

"By the way, Overmile," Hollister said, "I have a message here from your wife. She could not deliver it in person."

As he spoke, Hollister leaned across the table to place Aurora Overmile's envelope in front of the mayor. Breaking his fixed gaze at the blueprint on the table, Overmile picked up the envelope, muttered "Excuse me, gentlemen," and opened it.

As Overmile was reading his wife's revelation concerning her departure with Fritz Utendorffer, Hollister addressed the scowling councilmen on either side of the table, knowing he had their complete and rapt attention:

"This map," the marshal said, "is a plat of your neighboring town up the railroad, Fremont Tanks. During the past year and a half a corporation organized under the laws of the State of

Colorado has been secretly buying up all available land in and around Fremont Tanks. The corporation goes by the name of the Arroyo County Land Development Company."

Sol Saperstein said curiously, "What has this got to do with your resignation, marshal? Why should this meeting be concerned with a promotion scheme twenty miles away?"

Hollister grinned, flicking his glance back to Overmile. The banker was staring at his wife's message like a man who had been struck in the solar plexus by a sledgehammer.

"Everything, gentlemen," Hollister said. "The man who is hiding behind a corporate title is the man who wanted me to turn Conestoga Crossing into a ghost town, to use his own words. So that shipping pen and brothels, saloons and gambling halls—all the business enterprises that depend on the Texas trade to survive—would move to Fremont Tanks and be forced to buy land from the Arroyo County Land Development Company."

One-Eye Kate cleared her throat and spoke gently into the following silence, "I am here to tell you a few sidelights on the past history of the gentleman Mr. Hollister is referring to. It isn't a pretty story, gentlemen. But hearing it, you will be in a better position to understand what you are about to hear."

Hollister reached in his shirt pocket and brought out the telegram he had received within the past hour.

"I got in touch with the State Capitol," he said, "to find out who owned the stock in this Land Investment Company that is so interested in destroying Conestoga Crossing and cashing in on a land boom at Fremont Tanks. Mr. McPheeters, I believe—no, Mr. Pettigrew is the secretary of the council. I will let you read the contents of this telegram—"

Even as the storekeeper was reaching out to take the yellow flimsy from Hollister's hand, Claud Overmile broke the tension of this room with a berserk yell.

"Damn you, Hollister—you're back of what Aurora has done to me—"

HOLLISTER was not prepared for what happened next. He had expected the banker to collapse when his

Suffer Varicose LEG SORES?

IF you suffer pain and misery of Varicose Ulcers, or Open Leg Sores, send away at once for FREE Booklet "THE LIEPE METHODS FOR HOME USE." Tells all about this 40-year-old method, praised and endorsed by thousands. Liepe Methods, Dept. C-21 3284 N. Green Bay Ave., Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

THE KIND MEN LIKE!

(VEST POCKET SIZE)

They are loaded with rare cartoons. Full of Fun and Humor.. 20 DIFFERENT booklets sent prepaid for $1 in plain sealed wrapper. No C.O.D.'s.

GRAYKO, Dept. 2095 Box 520, G.P.O., N.Y.C. 1

ACCOUNTANT

BECOME AN EXPERT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A's earn $4,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A's examinations or executive accountancy positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A's. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."

LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St. A Correspondence Institution Dept. 2481-H, Chicago 5, Ill.

TOOTHACHE?

Quick relief with Dent's. Use Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops for cavity toothaches. Use Dent's Dental Poultice for pain or soreness in gums or teeth. At all drug stores.

"Since 1888"

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS DENTAL POULTICE

Cancer's danger signals

1. Any sore that does not heal
2. A lump or thickening in the breast or elsewhere
3. Unusual bleeding or discharge
4. Any change in a wart or mole
5. Persistent indigestion or difficulty in swallowing
6. Persistent hoarseness or cough
7. Any change in normal bowel habits

Can be your safety signals

Cancer is curable if discovered early and treated properly

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY, INC.

guilt was revealed to his unsuspecting neighbors. Instead, Overmile acted with the speed and ferocity of a man suddenly bereft of all reason.

Reaching forward to snatch up the oil lamp, Overmile hurled it with all his strength at Gil Hollister, standing behind One-Eye Kate's chair across the table.

Hollister ducked under the whistling bludgeon, heard the lamp shatter on the iron safe behind him. Instantaneously the barber shop's back room stood out in stark relief as blazing oil exploded with blinding violence, covering the back wall with leaping flame.

Choking an oath, Overmile followed up his berserk act by clawing under his Prince Albert for a gun. Before Hollister could recover his balance from flinging himself out of the path of the hurtling lamp, he saw flame lance from the bore of Claud Overmile's pistol.

Gunsmoke founted across the table and billowed against Kate Stengel. The banker's bullet, meant for Hollister, had caught the scarlet woman in the chest. Blood was already leaking through her dress.

Hollister jerked his own gun from leather, but before he could lay his aim on the insane banker across the table his arm was jostled by Lige McPheeters, scrambling out of the way of a crawling puddle of blazing oil. Hollister's bullet slammed into the ceiling.

Pandemonium broke. Great roils of thick smoke flowed past Hollister. Beyond that void the marshal had a dim, vague glimpse of Claud Overmile wheeling around to jerk open the door leading into the barber shop out front.

Knocked half off his feet by McPheeters, Hollister reached Kate Stengel's side. The princess of Conestoga Crossing's lurid quarter was forever beyond his aid. She was slumped dead in her chair, her lips sealed by the point-blank shot from the man who had shared her sordid past.

The blistering pressure from blazing wallpaper and debris was singeing Hollister's hair as he lifted One-Eye Kate's limp form into his arms and staggered toward the front door.

He heard Pettigrew bawling above the cacophony of the fire:

"We got to get the brigade out. This wind could shift and wipe out the town if it gets out of here—"

From the barber shop Hollister heard Johansen yelling, "That door's locked, Mayor. What in hell happened back there? What was the shootin'?"

Members of the council, berserk with panic, blocked the door, delaying Hollister's efforts to get the dead woman in his arms out of the path of the flames which had turned this council chamber into a seething caldron.

When he finally fought his way into the barber shop he found himself confronted by Johansen in his barber's apron, gesticulating wildly with comb and scissors toward an open door in the side of the building:

"Overmile ducked into the dance hall next door, marshal—"

Hollister yelled, "Get Kate out into the street," and thrust his grisly burden into the barber's arms.

Passing the barber's chair, Hollister raced through the open door to find himself inside the barnlike interior of the next-door dance hall, which opened its doors only at night.

He jumped to one side to keep from silhouetting himself against the flickering flames from the barbershop, eyes probing the shadows around the polished maple floor.

Overmile, in his blind panic, had raced into the Ace of Hearts because he had found the barber shop's street door locked against the fury of the storm rising outside. In all probability he was still somewhere in this great, echoing hall.

Above the howl of the storm and the mounting crackle of flames in the shop next door, Hollister's acutely-tuned ears picked up a sound of movement over to his left, in the direction of the dark-shuttered street windows.

HE WHEELED in that direction, gun palmed, knowing that if he got Overmile in his gunsights he would show the banker no mercy. Claud Overmile's real estate manipulations might have been entirely legal; he had broken no law up to now in seeking to destroy Conestoga Crossing. But when his bullet had snuffed out Kate Stengel's life, even if the bullet had probably been intended for Hollister, Overmile had put himself outside the

law.

Then, from somewhere in the murky shadows of the dance hall, Hollister caught the sound of the mayor's voice lashing at him:

"Come and get me, starpacker. With Aurora gone I don't give a damn how this thing goes, as long as I see you in hell ahead of me—"

In the empty vastness of this dance hall, Hollister could not orient the source of that voice, obscured as it was with clattering echoes. But in the next instant, a section of board wall gave way and fell into the Ace of Hearts, spilling red flame and coiling smoke out of the gutted barber shop's rear room.

As the shuttering flare of light put the details of the roundabout room into stark relief, Hollister saw Overmile crouching behind a bench in the corner to his left, his back against the outer wall of the building.

Hollister tipped his gun in that direction, but not before Claud Overmile got off his shot. A nozzle of flame jetted from the muzle of the banker's gun, and Hollister felt a white heat go through him as Overmile's slug smashed him in the shoulder and drove him off his feet.

Fighting to hold back the dark curtain that was settling over his senses, Hollister rolled over on his stomach, his elbow slipping on the waxed dance floor.

The roar of the flames spilling into the dance hall, the scorching blast of heat—these things were not registering on his senses now. His every impulse was channeled into a tight track of concentration as he picked up the blurred image of Claud Overmile working his way along the front wall toward the nearest shuttered window.

The Colt .44 in his fist seemed to weigh tons. Pulling the knurled hammer to full cock was like fighting a thousand-pound bull at the end of a lass'-rope.

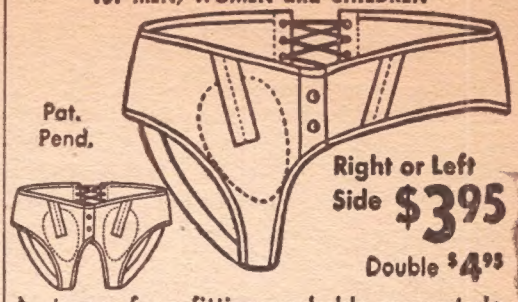
Overmile was unsnapping a window shutter now, his shape blackly lined against the gray eerie half-light of the street outside as he got the shutter open and raked out the window pane with his smoking gun barrel.

The banker was forking the window ledge when Hollister got his sights settled on Overmile. He saw Overmile twisting, lifting his gun for a last shot before

Immediate Comfort And Relief for You with

RUPTURE-EASER

(A PIPER BRACE PRODUCT)
for MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



A strong, form fitting washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Adjustable back-lacing and adjustable leg straps. Snaps up in front. Soft flat groin pad—NO STEEL OR LEATHER BANDS. Unexcelled for comfort, **INVISIBLE UNDER LIGHT CLOTHING.** Washable. Also used as after operation support.

- **THE MOST EFFECTIVE HERNIA SUPPORT.** Thousands of people who have tried old-fashioned, expensive devices turn to Rupture-Easer for new comfort.
- **RUPTURE-EASER IS SANITARY.** Can be washed without harm to fabric—you never offend when you wear Rupture-Easer.
- **NO FITTING REQUIRED.** Just measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and specify right or left side or double.

What Satisfied Users Say —

R. C. of Corvallis, Oregon, Air Mails: *"Send me another Ruture-Easer so I will have one to change off with. It is enabling me to work at top speed at my press machine 8 hours a day."*

M. S. of Anderson, Ind., thanks us and says: *"It is one of the finest things I have ever worn and has made my life worth living. It has given me untold ease and comfort."*

O. B. R. of Boston: *"Send me another . . . I wish to say to everyone who suffers as I did, 'Oh what relief I have found from its help!' "*

Blessed Relief Day and Night

You can sleep in it—you can work in it—you can bathe in it.

10-DAY TRIAL OFFER

Money Back guarantee if you don't get blessed relief!

Piper Brace Company, Dept. FHH-51
308 E. 12th St., Kansas City 6, Mo.

Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side ☐ $3.95 Measure around lowest part of
Left Side ☐ $3.95 my abdomen
Double ☐ $4.95 is.....INCHES.

We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s.
Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for $.....
☐ Send C.O.D.

Name.....

Address.....

City and State.....

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW!

leaving the doomed building.

Hollister didn't hear the roar of his revolver; he only felt the recoil of the stock against the crotch of his thumb. The forced draft of the fire which was licking up into the rafters of the dance hall over his head pulled the gunsmoke away, and he saw the splintered track that Overmile's bullet had made in the maple flooring ahead of his body.

Overmile was still seated on the window sill. As Hollister's senses faded he saw the banker's crumpled shape slowly topple outdoors and out of his view. Then Hollister was afloat in a black void where flame and smoke and the torture of his own wound held no meaning whatever . . .

He rallied for a moment, jerked to his senses by the sheer heat of the burning walls and roof, and he seemed to feel arms tugging at his armpits, and heard a voice, a girl's voice, Abbey Overmile's voice, saying over and over again in his ear, "They said you came in here—try to move your legs, Gil darling—"

THEN the curtain seemed to lift, as abruptly as it had fallen, but he was no longer inside the doomed fandango house. He was stretched out on the floor of a porch, his head cradled in Abbey Overmile's lap. She hadn't been a figment of his deragged mind, then. She was real. The soothing touch of her fingers lacing through his hair was nothing he could be imagining.

Then his eyes drew in focus and he saw a sign, Prairie Pride Furniture Outfitters, Coroner's Office, and he knew that somehow he had been brought across Stateline Street.

"So I wind up at—the coroner's office," Hollister said feebly, and tried to rise. Only then did he discover that his left shoulder was swathed in bandages, making it difficult for him to move.

"You'll be here only until George brings the surrey around for you, Gil," Abbey said. "Doctor Carson patched you up. He says we'll be in shape—you'll be in shape to leave for Wyoming inside of a month. Claud's bullet went clean through."

Hollister said, "Overmile—"

Abbey's involuntary shudder transmitted itself to him.

"He's still—over there—under all that burning rubbish. But the firemen got Kate away in time. Poor Kate . . ."

It was not until the negro George was carrying him down the steps and into the waiting surrey that Hollister saw what fearful events had transpired during the time his senses had been blanketed out.

Conestoga Crossing's West Side was doomed by the storm-driven flames which, eating their way at a terrifying pace along the closely-set buildings, was already threatening the stockyards on the other side of the Santa Fe tracks.

All the establishments on Hollister's circuit of Stateline—the Trail's End Hotel, Provart's Casino, the Silver Palace—all were seething ruins now. Nothing short of the open plain would halt that racing conflagration. Pettigrew's volunteer fire brigade, knowing that, were busy with buckets and pumper wagon wetting down the business houses on the East Side, in case a shift in the wind threatened the other half of Conestoga Crossing.

"Looks like . . . Overmile made his ghost town . . . himself," Hollister panted, pain stabbing him as old George, with the help of peg-legged Jeb Conway, lifted him and made him comfortable on the back seat of the surrey.

A mad procession of ghosts flickered across the backdrop of Hollister's mind, demanding their turn in his memory.

Claud Overmile, the author of all this destruction, had come to the same grizzly end as the three ringleaders of the West Side he had hypocritically damned. One-Eye Kate, August Provart . . . dead. Utendorffer and Aurora, gone from Conestoga forever, for better or worse. All the actors had made their exits.

The West Side would be a smoking ash heap tomorrow, from Stateline to Cimarron and beyond. Next year when the Texans came up over the horizon they would find a portion of this trail town rebuilt for them, its old wild days gone into the limbo that in a few years would see the end of the big cattle drives across the Red. Fremont Tanks, the bulk of its land owned by a dead man, would never gain its place in the sun now . . .

Abbey Overmile was on her knees at his side, covering Hollister with a lap-robe against the gale as the surrey got in motion, Jeb Conway sharing the driver's

seat with old George. Jeb might make a good roustabout up on the Rafter H.

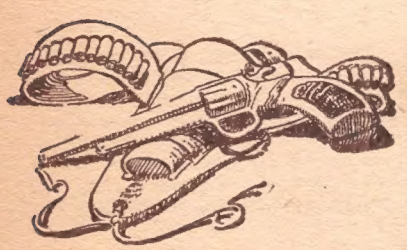
The surrey swung east on Postoak, leaving the superheated air and the tympani-sound of raging flames behind it. The wind bearing out of the north with the sand of the Niobrara hills on it was more cool than abrasive to Hollister's scalded flesh.

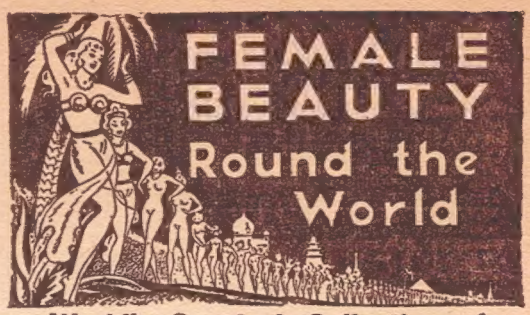
He felt Abbey's cheek against his and he said, "You fished me out of that dance hall—I'm already in your debt before we start, Abbey. I'll get a few gray hairs remembering the risk you took for me—"

The girl's soft lips pressed against his, and he surrendered himself to the ecstasy of it, knowing his life was only now beginning, that it would always be this way between them.

"Gil, my own Gil, I love you so," Abbey whispered as the surrey swung under the wrought-iron portal of the home where he would spend his convalescence. "What is it like up in Wyoming?"

"Why," Gil Hollister said, thinking it over, "it's green and wild and beautiful . . . and up to now it's been mighty lonesome, sweetheart. With you there I think it'll be more like the heaven you hear about . . ."





World's Greatest Collection of Strange and Secret Photographs

NOW you can travel round the world with the most daring adventurers. You can see with your own eyes the weirdest peoples on earth. You witness the strangest customs of the red, white, brown, black and yellow races. You attend their startling rites, their mysterious practices. They are all assembled for you in these five great volumes of THE SECRET MUSEUM OF MANKIND.

600 LARGE PAGES

Here is the world's Greatest Collection of Strange and Secret Photographs. Here are Exotic Photos from Europe. Primitive Photos from Africa, Torture Photos from Asia, Strange Photos from Oceania and America, and hundreds of others. There are almost 600 LARGE PAGES of Strange and Secret Photographs, each page 57 square inches in size.

1,000 PHOTOS

You see actual courtship practiced in every quarter of the world. You see magic and mystery in queer lands where the foot of a white man has rarely trod. You see Oriental modes of marriage and slavery in China, Japan, India, etc. Through the intimacy of the cameras you witness the exotic habits of every continent and the strangest customs, in America, Europe, etc. You are bewildered by these large pages of ONE THOUSAND PHOTOGRAPHS, including 130 full-page photos and thrilled by the hundreds of short stories that describe them.

Contents of 5-Volume Set
VOLUME 1
The Secret Album of Africa
VOLUME 2
The Secret Album of Europe
VOLUME 3
The Secret Album of Asia
VOLUME 4
The Secret Album of America
VOLUME 5
The Secret Album of Oceania

5 PICTURE PACKED VOLUMES

The SECRET MUSEUM OF MANKIND consists of five picture-packed volumes (solidly bound together for convenient reading). Dip into any one of these volumes, and as you turn its pages, you find it difficult to tear yourself away. Here, in story and unusual photo, is the WORLD'S GREATEST COLLECTION OF STRANGE AND SECRET PHOTOGRAPHS, containing everything from Female Beauty Round the World to the most Mysterious Cults and Customs. These hundreds and hundreds of large pages will give you days and nights of thrilling instruction.

Specimen Photos
Dress and Undress Round the World
Various Secret Societies
Strange Crimes, Criminals
Omens, Totems & Taboos
Mysterious Customs
1,000 Strange and Secret Photos

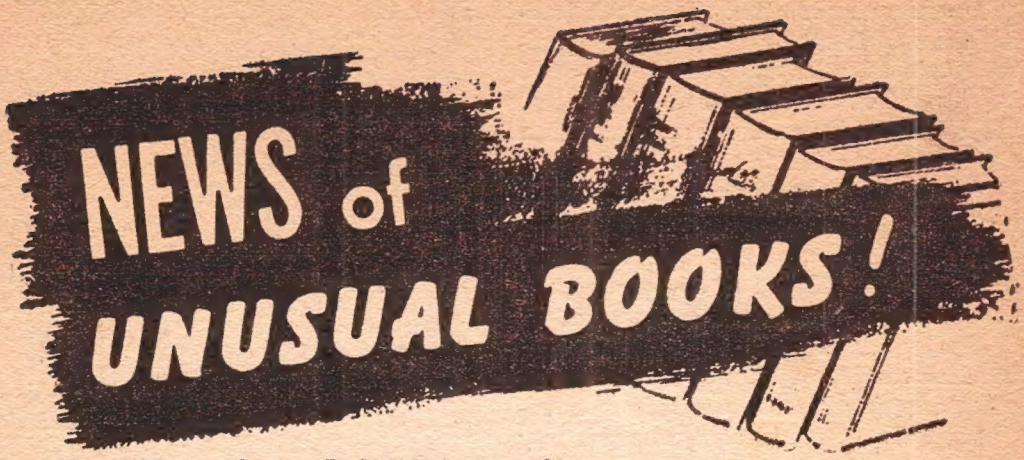
SEND NO MONEY

Simply sign and mail the coupon. Remember, each of the 5 Volumes is 9¼ inches high, and opened, over a foot wide! Remember also that this 5-Volume Set formerly sold for $10. And it is bound in expensive "life-time" cloth. Don't put this off. Fill out the coupon, drop it in the next mail, and receive this huge work at once.

Metro Publications, 363 Broadway, Dept. 1805, N. Y. 13, N. Y.
Send me "The Secret Museum of Mankind" (5 great volumes bound together). I will pay postman $1.98, plus postage on arrival. If not delighted, I will return books in 5 days for full refund of $1.98.

Name.....
Address.....
City.....Zone.....State.....

☐ CHECK HERE if you are enclosing $1.98, thus saving mailing costs. Same Money-Back Guarantee.
Canadian and Foreign Orders—$2.50 in Advance.



from PARIS... from ROME... and some RIGHT OUT OF THE HEART OF HELL!

Originally From $3. to $25. A Copy

... AND NOT TO BE HAD AT BOOK STORES OR LIBRARIES!

1. LILA AND COLLETTE. A translation from the French of the adventures of two charming cocottes behind the little red lights of prewar Paris. With those carefree Rahnghild drawings which decorated the $25 edition privately published under the title *There Are Twenty Good Ways of Doing It.* ***Now Only $1.98.***

2. PASQUERELLA AND MADONNA BASETTA. The strange lives of two violent and beautiful women against the soft, alluring background of the freedom and abandon of the Renaissance, and attributed to Boccaccio. The Fabio Fabbi illustrations make this edition even more glamorous than the $7.50 one from which the text is reproduced. ***Now Only $1.98.***

3. RED CANVAS. An American correspondent has left his young, beautiful wife in Paris while the city was still in the hands of the Germans. The carefree brutality of love in wartime is the background of this breathless story of a city whose men could fight the enemy and whose women were forced to comfort him. ***Only $1.98.***

4. TWO LESSONS IN LOVE. The story of a man who pretends to be deaf, and hears from the lips of his wife and his daughter inside stuff about their private lives which a whole detective agency would never be able to discover for him. ***Reduced to $1.98.***

5. SHANGHAI HONEYMOON. Two beautiful white women, mother and daughter, match their femininity against the wiles of the greedy little merchants of the Far East. You may imagine for yourself what happens, but you can never imagine the conversations which only that darling of the Parisiennes, Maurice Dekobra, can provide. ***Only $2.98.***

6. BUMARAP. Samuel Roth's account of a passionate young revolutionist who dreams his way from a park bench on Columbus Circle to a famous house on Madison Avenue. How he got his name, stumbled into the apartment of a red-headed young Countess, and spent thirty-six hours in the most wonderful bed he had ever seen are matters you will chuckle over for many a happy hour. Delightfully illustrated. ***Reduced to $1.98.***

YOU CAN BUY ONE BOOK OR MORE

ALL 6 BOOKS $12.00

QUANTITIES LIMITED

ORDER IMMEDIATELY

ORDER BY NUMBER

PERSONAL SERVICE, FG-1
110 LAFAYETTE ST., NEW YORK 13, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

I enclose.....for book(s) whose number(s) I check below. I may return for full credit what does not altogether please me.

1 2 3 4 5 6

NAME.....

NO. and STREET.....

CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

☐ Let me have the 6 books for $12

☐ Send C.O.D. I enclose $1 as binder and will pay balance to postmen